

Matchmaking Wars: Stage 4

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Summary: The attack on the Green Army's capitol city has triggered events that have altered the state of the war forever. In a massive conflict called the War of Six Armies, every single faction has now initiated an aggressive campaign for total domination. The threat of complete chaos is quickly emerging, as the entire galaxy becomes consumed with the tides of war.

1. The Formation of Dark Alliances

1 " THE FORMATION OF DARK ALLIANCES

A full siege of the galaxy was underway at the hands of the Purple, Red, and Orange Armies, It was a move of reclamation for territory owned by the Big Three: the Armies of Green, Yellow, and Blue. This evolution in the galactic war between all six Armies had been triggered only a day earlier, when Centerpoint City, the capitol of the Green Army, had been invaded by its oldest foe, the Purples. The city had become subject to a terrible siege. Yet in the end, it had managed to survive. But for the Purple Army, it was not entirely a defeat. For the Grand General, the leader of the Green Army, had been captured during the battle. Feeling the wind at their backs, the other Purple fleets, kept hidden until the proper time, had immediately launched an assault upon the galaxy at large. Upon every galactic arm, worlds were quickly falling to their tide.

At the same time, the Orange and Red Armies were also expanding. The Orange Army, however, was not expanding out of lust for conquest. Rather, it needed territory. And badly, for its one and only refuge was its capitol city, Strongenheim, and it was on a planet fraught with war from all sides. And so, the Orange campaign was one of a different sort: it was a campaign of exploration, a desperate search for more resources and territory. The efforts of this endeavor had yielded many planets which were candidates for major bases in the war.

One such world was that of PastrÃ© MÃ°finn, at the tip of the largest

arm of the galaxy. At a time early on in the war, it had been taken by the Blue Army. But the Blues had abandoned it more than two years ago, having expanded too thin during their preliminary explorations of that part of space. In their carelessness, the Blues had left behind numerous natural resources. It was therefore the perfect site for an Orange Base. And so, on a hilltop overlooking a circular valley, a modular assortment of metallic parts began to coalesce into a structure. Vehicles and Orange soldiers were stationed all around. Soon would come mechanations for delving into the planet's crust and extracting the valuable natural resources within.

A lone guard stood off to the side, staring out into the landscape. His job was to keep watch for enemies. Since the planet had been abandoned, the guard had no idea what enemies could possibly exist here. Perhaps a small base of Blues, left over from the original occupation. But surely nothing more than that. But nevertheless, the guard stood vigilant. He would do his duty not matter whatâ€|until his shift ended, at least. Although, he had to admit that he was really quite bored. There was nothing to do except stare out into the landscape. He really should have brought a book along, he realized. Then he corrected himself. Because if he was reading, then he would not be able to watch the landscape, which, he then remembered, was his job. He had to be vigilant. A few minutes passed. The shadows on the ground shifted. The guard's perceived world became one of anthropomorphic muffins dancing in a gleeful circle.

He jolted upright with a start. He had to be vigilant! He was not allowed to doze off. He took in a few large breaths, to keep himself awake. Around him, the landscape glowed in the sunlight. He stared at the extensive grassland of the valley below, then looked upwards to the dense forests beyond it. Floating above the forests was the sun. The guard then looked eastâ€|to the sun. _Now wait a minute,_ the guard thought to himself. _This system is only supposed to have one sun, not two._ He looked back at the first sun. It was coming towards him! It could now be seen as a giant white sphere of light, which was traveling towards the guard, but getting smaller as it drifted along. _Am I still dreaming, _the guard wondered.

The ball of light came to a stop in the air. It was directly above the guard, and a little off to one side. The ball was still getting smaller, and within the next few seconds, it had disappeared completely. And in its placeâ€|was a swarm of floating fusion coils. The guard decided that he was still dreaming, so he kicked himself. It hurt, which was odd, considering that he _had_ to be dreaming. The cloud of fusion coils drifted down to ground level. They all seemed to be hovering around one coil in particular, and were forming a kind of shell around it. Once the swarm of fusion coils had touched the grass, they fell into a large pile, with the central coil ending up as the one on top. The other coils then began to shake, and made a sound at the same time. It sounded almost likeâ€|sobbing. But that was impossible, the guard thought to himself. Fusion coils can't cry! This was the moment when dozens of other fusion coils floated out of the forest. As a group, they glided up to the pile that had just teleported in.

Then one of the fusion coils from the forest spoke. "Our leaderâ€|by the ionsâ€|_what's happened to him!_" The crowd of fusion coils descended upon the pile, surrounding it and then closing in, as if they were somehow in panic.

"He hasâ€¦fallenâ€¦" said one of the coils from the pile, in shock.

Another one of the forest fusion coils suddenly shot up to the top coil, coming to hover around it. "Vincentâ€¦NOOO! He's not dead. Someone tell me that he's not dead!"

"Glowey," said another coil. "My dear. Vincent is not dead. But he is gravely wounded. He used up all of his psychic energy in a heroic act of sacrifice, which caused his core to nearly overload. He is in a state of coma."

The coil hovering around the top, the one called Glowey, shouted "No, Vincent. My poor Vincent! You can't leave me. _You can't leave me!_" Her core was now glowing exceptionally bright. "You promised me that we'd always be together. That we'd rule the universe as a couple."

The central coil (named Vincent, apparently) remained stationary.

"We were going to start a family," Glowey continued. "We were going to have babies, Vincent. Babies! Little tiny coils bouncing up and down with joy. I was going to watch them develop their casings. Watch them levitate their first objects. And then, when we were older, we were going to head to radioactive nebulae, and smell the ions together. We were going to be _so happy! _But none of that can happen if you're in a coma. You have to wake up, Vincent."

"He can't hear you, I'm afraid," said one of the other fusion coils in the pile.

"We can bring him back," said Glowey with naive hope. "I need batteries."

"This will not work," the doctor coil stated.

"_I said bring me batteries!_" Glowey shrieked back at him. "AA. No, size C. No, D! Something, bring me anything! I just want him back!"

Another fusion coil gave her a series of batteries. Glowey telekinetically applied them to Vincent's electric nodes and connected them using a wire. She waited with agonizing anticipation as each battery was drained. "Come back to me, Vincent!" she pleaded to the universe. "Come back to me!"

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when the doctor coil came up to Glowey. "There is nothing you can do. All that can be done now is to waitâ€¦and hope. I am sorry, my dear." Glowey began to sob again. And then, the whole community of fusion coils floated up off of the ground, and levitated into the forest, eventually becoming obscured by the trees. The last of them vanished into the green abyss with a glint of reflected sunlight.

The Orange guard just stood in place for perhaps another ten minutes. He did not stand out of vigilance. Instead, he stood because he was trying to figure out exactly what reality he was in anymore. He also had no idea what he was supposed to do in this situation. He mauled things over in his head for awhile. Eventually, he decided that,

since he was a guard, it was his job and duty to report back in with what he had just seenâ€|regardless of how peculiar a sight it was.

He trudged back to the base. By now, construction was well underway. The main building was about half complete, with the walls of the first floor having been erected. The guard began to jog, searching for his commanding officer. He eventually tracked him down. The officer was overseeing the construction process from a high rise. "Sir!" the guard called out.

The officer turned. "What is it, soldier?"

"I have seen something in the valley!" the guard shouted as he approached the officer. He began to pant as soon as he stopped, catching his breath.

The officer walked quickly over to the guard. "You've seen activity, have you? This planet was supposed to have been abandoned. Perhaps the intel we were given about this place was false. I should have suspectedâ€|"

"I don't think they were enemies," said the guard.

The officer crossed his arms. "Hm. Well, what then?" The guard struggled to think of what to say. As the officer watched him, he did everything he could to figure out how to explain. "What did you see?" the officer repeated, showing his impatience in his tone. "Why won't you tell me? Why do you hesitate?"

The guard leaned upwards, getting into the officer's visor. "Because sirâ€|I don't have a flying fuck what I just saw."

* * *

><p>A chorus of footsteps echoed throughout the access hallway to the Command Dome of the Avant Garde. Hathrow Vorennius, the leader of the Purple Army, led the group. He was followed by his advisor and bodyguard, Nezilus Thane, as well as a dozen-fold squad of security soldiers. Together, the fourteen of them were jogging down the length of the corridor. They decelerated to a stop as soon as they were outside of the entrance to the dome. Two guards were waiting at the door, standing to either side. Vorennius addressed one of the guards: "Is the command dome under attack?"

The guard shook his helmet. "We don't believe so, Admiral. The life signs show only one person in there. But somehow, the door has locked. We cannot get inside."

Vornnius nodded, then turned to one of the men in the squad behind him. "Blow the door."

The soldiers brought forth charges and placed them at specific points on the door. The command dome was designed so that it could not be bypassed with any measuresâ€|unless the bypassers knew to place detonation charges at very specific locations on the door. There was a series of flashes, after which point the two guards standing at either side of the door grabbed hold of it and heaved it to the side. Then everyone burst inside. Vorennius led the charge as the mass of Purples stormed the room.

There was nothing inside.

The group stopped, confused. There were no enemies from other armies waiting for them. Nor were there any traitorous Purples lurking about, waiting to stick the group in the back. Instead, there was absolutely no one. He noticed that most of the lighting in the chamber had been turned off somehow, so that nearly all of the room was cloaked in inky darkness. Vorennius let the silence wash over him. He had to concentrate. Something was amiss, and only perseverance would allow him to discern what it was. Something had definitely changed since he had last been here. So he silenced everyone else, then opened his senses and listened.

And indeed, he did hear something. There was a sliding sound coming from the other side of the central holographic console. Vorennius led the group forward, his hand on the hilt of his White Blade. As the group approached the source of the sound, they could hear it more clearly. Ahead of them, the command chair was very quickly swiveling around and around and around. And at the same time, they could hear laughter coming from it. Giggling, of a sort. It sounded like the kind of thing an overenthusiastic child might exclaim after having done something mischievous. Yet the voice sounded much older, almost maniacal. And now, he could faintly see someone sitting in the chair. Their armor was very darkly colored, and in the darkness Vorennius had a difficult time making the figure out.

The group raised their weapons. "Get out of my command chair," Vorennius demanded loudly of the figure.

The chair continued to swivel, and the mischievous giggling actually became louder.

"I will ask you one final time," the Admiral barked.

That was when the chair began to slow down. The group kept their weapons trained upon it as it squeaked to a stop. They could now see who was sitting in it. The figure was clothed in jet black armor, so dark that it seemed as though it were consuming all light that touched it. The figure was wearing a red visor which had a very thick V shape, and from the top of the head poked a tall spike or horn. The group of Purples and the black armored figure stared at each other for perhaps fifteen seconds. Then the figure extended his arms outwards. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is this _yours_?" His tone lacked any sincerity whatsoever.

"Get out!" said Vorennius. "How did you even find your way in here?"

"You know, I really would get up," said the figure in black. "But this chairâ€¦well, what can I say? It's really quite comfortable."

"Take him," the Admiral ordered to the rest of the group. But instead of rushing forward, the soldiers behind him remained still, and began to make startled grunting noises. Vorennius turned around. "What are you doing? I said, seize the infiltrator!"

"Weâ€¦can'tâ€¦" came the reply of one of the security soldiers. "Our armor won't move, sir! We're paralyzed!"

The Admiral approached the soldier who had spoken. "What do you mean?" He reached out and touched the soldier's arm. Just as the soldier had said, his armor was all locked up. The group was effectively locked inside hollow statues. "What in the universe is going on?" Vorennius asked rhetorically under his breath. He then turned to face the black armored soldier. "Are you doing this?" he demanded.

The infiltrator was swiveling slowly and whimsically around in the command chair again. At the Admiral's question, he slowed down a little bit and said: "I'm afraid they aren't under your control anymore, Admiral. I always love acquiring new playthings." He let out a little cackle of delight.

"Playthings?" Vorennius asked.

He heard movement from behind him. He swiveled around and started at what he saw. The other Purple soldiers had climbed on top of one another, and those on the very top were leaning at an angle, so that the group created a dome like structure out of themselves. The hemisphere of people extended up to perhaps half the height of the command dome. One of the soldiers shouted out in panic: "Our armor is moving on its own! We're not doing this, something else is!"

More giggling came from behind the Admiral. "What shall I have them do next, I wonder?" said the black armored figure. "A tableau, perhaps? Or maybe act out some kind of skit?"

"Who are you!" Vorennius shouted at him. "How are you doing this?"

The figure turned a little bit more in the command chair, coming to regard the Admiral with half attention. "Do you know who I am, Admiral? Because I know who you are. Hmhmhm, oh yes, Vorennius. I know everything about you."

"Who? What? Are you?" said the Admiral.

"I don't suppose you've read any children's books lately, have you?" said the figure. He began to swivel around again. "I would have preferred that my equivalent to a biography were stored in something a bit more impressive, but this universe seems to enjoy playing jokes. So do I, as a matter of fact." He giggled for a moment. Not knowing what else to do, the Admiral just stood and waited for the figure to actually get around to answering his question. The response came on its own time. "Perchance, Admiral, have you ever heard of something called the Great War? Ring any bells?"

The Admiral shook his helmet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, of course you don't," said the figure. "_Stupid universe!_ Ah, I suppose that I might as well clue you in a bit more, then. Know anything about a supposed ancient war that consumed the entire galaxy? Still can't place me? Gigantic conflict that restarted all of civilization? Hmmm, Admiral? Rumor has it that you people believe in the Old World. I had thought that you would be more accomplished at a quiz like this."

The Admiral perked up at mention of the Old World. "It can't beâ€|" he thought aloud. "Are youâ€|Aeon the Maintainer?"

The figure paused his swiveling for a second, then expelled a giant boisterous laugh. "Um, I think you just described my retarded half brother. Try again!"

"Vitian the Lifeweaver?"

The figure let out another bout of giggling. "Hotter. Keep trying, you're almost there."

"Amnion!"

The figure began to clap. "Ta da! You guessed it! I amâ€|Amnion the Great and Powerful! Or at least, that's what I would be called if this stupid universe hadn't gone and forgotten me."

"Amnion the Lord of Insanity, if I recall," said Vorennius.

"Both titles work," said Amnion. "Whatever floats your boat."

Vorennius walked around the central holographic console, so that he could more closely see the entity claiming to be the Lord of Insanity. "If you truly are Amnionâ€|then why are you here?"

"Oh, getting right to the good stuff, are we?" Amnion chuckled. "Fine then. I've come to strike an alliance between the Red Army, which I now control, and your Army, Admiral."

Vorennius shook his visor. "That alliance shattered just before I launched the attack on Centerpoint City."

"You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you?" said Amnion. "Not quite that simple, I'm afraid. You see, when you first met my former pawn Vincent the Fusion Coil, you struck a deal with the Red Army. And we don't value our deals quite as lightly as you seem to do yours. Our alliance will remain."

Vorennius shook his helmet. "I have no interest in making alliances at this time in my own plans. And certainly not with an entity like you."

The Admiral suddenly felt his armor tighten. He struggled in surprise, only to find that he could no longer move. Then his knees began to bend, and before he knew what was going on, he was kneeling on the floor in front of Amnion. The black clad soldier made a tsk-tsk sound. "Now Admiral, who ever said anything about you being given a choice? Just look around you, Vorenniusâ€|"oh that's right, you can't. Ahahaha! Your soldiers cannot move of their own free will, as I am sure you have come to realize. And now, neither can you. You see Admiral, I already have control of your Army. I can make it do whatever I want, whenever I want. I can make your ships jump into the center of a sun, make every single one of the soldiers in your Army perform an elaborate opera, and even force them to fight battles for me. The only real point of this conversation, in fact, is that I'm just letting you know that I have control of your Army. Because I'm such a decent person."

Though he knew it was futile, Vorennius continued to struggle. "I will _never _serve you."

"Bow before me," said Amnion. Vorennius' back moved downwards, his visor coming to look at the floor. "Very good," said the black clad soldier. "You're such an obedient little Purple."

Vorennius suddenly stood up (not of his own volition), and his legs walked towards Amnion, so that he was soon standing right in front of the command chair. "Please stop this," Vorennius whispered.

"Oh, what's that?" said Amnion, perking up. "Is the big bad Admiralâ€|pleading? Ahahaha! Oh, please Mr. Amnion, release me from this horrible imprisonment!" Amnion leaned back again. "Tell you what. I'll let you all be for now, but on one condition. When you get to your asteroid community and stand before your most proud followers, I want you to announce that the Red and Purple Armies are returning to their alliance. It might have been just a truce before, actually. Ah well, it makes no matter. Because the next time you broadcast a speech, you're going to say that Reds and Purples are going to be the best of friends from now on. Hunkey-dorey hugs and kisses, and all that good stuff. Admiralâ€|do you understand?"

Vorennius said nothing.

"Nod your little head," said Amnion. Vorennius' helmet moved up and down by itself. "Very good," the black clad soldier exclaimed boisterously.

"Now release me," said Vorennius through his teeth.

"You know, Admiral," said Amnion. "I think that in the future we should have more chats like this. It's good just to talk about things. Catch up on the latest plots. And I'm feeling very good about our little relationship, because there are just SO many things that I plan to do to this universe, now that I have been restored to my full power. True, the galaxy has been plagued with war for quite a while now. But that's not enough. I want to engineer a new eraâ€|of pure darkness and chaos. And you, little Admiral, will be one of my instruments for doing so." Amnion got up from the command chair and began to stroll about the command dome. "Well, I said that I would leave all of you alone for now, and I'm a being of my wordâ€|oftenâ€|so I'll do just that." He spread his arms open wide while facing the group of paralyzed Purples. "Ta ta!" His body then dissolved into an abyss of shadow.

There was a sound like rushing air, and then the lighting returned to the command deck as Amnion, in his Shadow Form, departed the _Avant Garde_. Vorennius instantly felt a release on his armor, and he fell to the steel floor grating. He, as well as the other Purples in the room, could finally move again. He hoisted himself up slowly. _Can that really have just happened_, he thought silently to himself. _And if it didâ€|then what am I supposed to do now?_

2. Plans Forged In Secret

2 â€" PLANS FORGED IN SECRET

The fate of the entire Orange Army rested upon the continued existence of a giant bubble. The one and only city of the Oranges was surrounded by a kilometers-wide energy shield, and this was the only thing preventing the other forces on XBOXL1V from turning it into nothing more than a cloud of vapors. From the very center of the City of Strongenheim, the Empress of the Orange Army, Selina Owara, stared out at the desert beyond the shield's limits. Too much now faced her Army. It was on the verge of annihilation. Only days ago, the Purples had launched an attack on the city, managing to spare it only when the Empress had made a deal regarding an important artifact. Now, she had sent her forces to the furthest reaches of the galaxy, to search for territory that the Orange Army could claim without being detected. Everything was so precarious, even after the Orange people had been through so much already. Even after they had survived what lay beyond the Fourth Wall, and then barely managed to return to this universe only a month ago.

The scene behind her was bathed in orange colored light. Her throne room was illuminated by bright flames from torches around the chamber's perimeter. The light was interrupted slightly as someone stepped into the room. The Empress turned to see her second in command, General Solienne Tarl, standing at the entrance. Tarl strode forward. "Empress," he greeted.

The Empress turned from the window and walked towards the center of the room. A circular table dominated the chamber. It was not used for eating on top of, however. Instead, its surface displayed an interactive holographic map of the galaxy, along with territory icons for all sectors with intel. "General Tarl, how go our efforts on the Stretch Arm?" She selected the sectors of the largest arm of the galaxy, which wound around the galaxy's nucleus like a very thick piece of thread.

"Better than expected," said the Orange General. "We have managed to uncover several worlds that could easily serve our purposes. All of them, so far, are in the Stretch Arm, mainly because the other Armies have the least presence there." He reached out to the map and highlighted several points, which were colored in bright orange.

The Empress nodded as she listened to Tarl speak. "Good," she said to herself. "Yes, this is very good."

"We already have a resource extraction base mostly set up on a planet called PastrÃ© MÃ°finn," Tarl continued. "I greatly anticipate that this world will be a boon to our efforts. Through recently, there have been some very odd sightings thereâ€¦"

"What kinds of sightings?" the Empress asked.

The General shook his head. "Probably nothing. People making up stories, something about fusion coils. Pay no mind to it."

The Empress sighed. "Things are finally starting to look up for us. And I have been thinkingâ€¦ there may be a way to improve our situation even more."

Tarl perked up. "What is your will, Empress?"

The Empress crossed her arms in thought. "Ever since the Green-Yellow Alliance came into being, we have had informants stationed undercover

in both Armies. And certain plans have recently come to my attention."

The General nodded. "I see. Yes, I have known about the informants. I believe that the Purple Army was trying something similar as well, but their spy program ended unsuccessfully due to the inexperience of its agents."

The Empress continued: "Our agents have been specially trained, all of them being experienced enough not to fail us. And they have provided me with enough information to recognize an opportunity. Now that all six Armies are fighting throughout the galaxy at full force, the war has become that much more complex and multifaceted. In order to manage this new situation, the Green-Yellow Alliance has decided to host a war council."

Solienne Tarl nodded. "Yes, I have heard of this myself. But I am afraid I do not see this opportunity you speak of."

"The territory we are gaining in the Stretch Arm is very much appreciated," said the Empress. "But it will not be enough. We Oranges have numbered much too few ever since the Battle of Earth. No matter how much territory or resources we hold, we simply do not have the manpower to win this war by ourselves. I have tried to think of another way, but there is none. We need an alliance."

"You plan to attend the war council," Tarl realized. "But Empress, pardon me for questioning you, but what exactly makes you think the Green-Yellow Alliance will take up your offer? It was not so long ago that we launched an attack on Centerpoint City ourselves, and nearly succeeded in taking over much of its underground sectors. The Green Army will have a hard time forgiving this, I should think."

The Empress nodded. "I know your concerns, General. And I believe I have found a way to make the Green and Yellow Armies listen to us."

"You have?"

"An artifact," said the Empress.

Tarl began to look somewhat confused. "What artifact? We gave the Quantum Manipulator to the Purple Army. And now they don't even have it anymore, because the Green-Yellow Alliance stole it. The last one of my informants told me of it, the Manipulator was somewhere in Centerpoint City."

"Not all of it," the Empress corrected smugly.

The General just stared at her visor.

The Empress continued: "When the Purples were on our doorstep, I knew I had to give them something. Something which they would believe was extremely valuable. So indeed, I did give them the Manipulator. But not before removing its power source. Of course, the Manipulator is capable of generating a certain amount of power on its own. But without its power core, it cannot achieve its full potential."

"So you gave Vorennius something which he couldn't actually use," the

General paraphrased. "That was clever."

"I couldn't allow the Purple Army to gain the full power of the Manipulator," said Owara. "Especially not when they were planning to give it over to Vincent and the Reds. That kind of power in the wrong hands would have been disastrous."

"So what does the Manipulator's power core have to do with the Green-Yellow Alliance's war council?" the General asked.

The Empress responded by opening up a hidden compartment on the underside of the map console. She entered a code number, then took her hand back out. What she held within her gauntlet was a sight to behold. General Solienne Tarl allowed the light from the artifact to wash over him. His posture became lax, and he sank almost to his knees. "Oh yes. You are right, Empress—it's so beautiful—so powerful—"

The Empress nodded and laughed smugly. "Now at last, you see. This is exactly what we need to sway them. I show this to the Green-Yellow Alliance—and they will do whatever I want."

* * *

><p>The sound of drums resonated throughout the courtyard of the central square in Centerpoint City. Probably the only forest that existed within the city's walls, the courtyard was covered with maple. The air was permeated with a haze of smog and airborne ash, a constant reminder that the city has just been through the worst battle in its lifetime. A concrete street ran through the middle of the courtyard, with lines of Green and Yellow soldiers standing on each side. At the end of the path was a subtle incline that led up to a platform. All of the soldiers along the path stood at perfect attention as a Green soldier with lots of metals strutting out from his chest plate walked slowly down the length of the courtyard. The section of soldiers closest to the platform were Lemon and Lime Squadrons, as well as Brian and the floating orb they had named Master Chief.<p>

Tom cleared his throat. "This is an awfully elaborate ceremony for someone who is only really a placeholder for the Grand General."

Skope turned and looked at the Yellow. "Even so, this guy will be serving as the leader of the entire Green Army if or until the Grand General is returned to us."

"Ashton Houle," said Ryan. "Was that really the best name they could choose?"

"Is there something wrong with it?" Skope asked.

"It's just not so much better than the Grand General's name," Ryan replied.

"Richard Face?" said Skope.

Ryan shrugged. "I mean, take whichever one you prefer. I'm just having a hard time choosing between Mr. Ass Hole and Mr. Dick Face."

Hester jabbed Ryan with her elbow, then whispered into the side of his helmet: "We are still in this city by the courtesy of the Green Army. Do not give them reason to take that away."

Ryan decided to shut up at that point, especially given the fact that Ashton Houle and his harem of medals happened to be slowly walking by him at that moment. The rest of the group maintained their silence as well. Ashton Houle finally reached the ramp and the platform at the end of the courtyard a minute later. He stepped forward towards the microphone, then hit a button that allowed the mike to transmit to the entire city.

"I greet you, citizens of Centerpoint City, and all of the worlds in the Green-Yellow Alliance. As I am sure all of you are very aware, yesterday was a sad day for the Green Army. Our city was besieged by the Purple Army, and nearly fell. The damage done is almost incalculable. The entire Western District will have to be rebuilt. The great wall surrounding the Capitol District was breached in many places. And all over the city, countless buildings were destroyed from both the coilguns of Purple ships, as well as a mysterious force of electrified spikes. But none of this compares to something else we lost, which causes much else to pale in magnitude."

"Our Grand General was captured by the Purples just before they retreated from this city. We have reason to believe that he is alive, because the Purples thought that he was worth capturing instead of killing. We can only hope that, one day, he will return to us. But until that time, he cannot serve as our leader. That is why I, Ashton Houle, formerly a General of this sector of space, will not be adopting the responsibilities of the Grand General's role. I will be the Acting Grand General for as long as Richard Face remains in captivity, and I shall attempt to be all that he was."

"Our city has been hit hard by the Purple's attack. But homes can be rebuilt. Walls can be repaired. The city can return to the way it was. But this will take time. And it will require help from all of us. Especially in light of the turn of the war, now poised to become a conflict involving six Armies instead of just the Big Three, the going will be difficult. But I am confident that we can succeed. During the battle, when the Purples were right outside the wall of the Capitol District, the Grand General said: 'We are not fighting for the sake of victory. We are fighting for the _future._' And I tell you, peoples of Centerpoint City, that future is _now_. The next chapter, possibly our greatest chapter, is one that we shall write of our own will. And we shall do it _together_, Greens and Yellows alike. Standing before all of you, I hereby accept the title of Acting Grand General, and I mean to bring the Green-Yellow Alliance to the height of glory. Thank you."

As he said his final words, the Green and Yellow soldiers in the courtyard broke into enthusiastic clapping and applause. "That was good," Kevin commented to Nome. "I thought it started out really slowly and kind of plodded along at first, but I really loved the last bits."

Nome nodded. "Yes, I too believe that the introduction was lacking. But the conclusion was almost masterful."

The Acting Grand General was now shaking the hands of several of the

Green Generals. As this was happening, one of the aids came over to the group of Green Team. "The Acting Grand General would like to speak with all of you in private as soon as the ceremony has concluded," the aide said.

The Greens looked at each other. "What about Lemon Squadron and Yellow Team?" Skope asked.

The aide shook his head. "The Acting Grand General said that it had to be just you. I don't know any more than that." And then he walked off.

The Greens looked at each other. "What do you suppose this is about?" Kenny asked.

"No idea," said Jess. "But my bets are on some kind of secret mission."

"I hope it's not something to endanger the Yellow Army," said Kevin. "Because I can't think of any other reason why he would want to keep Lemon out of it."

With the speech over, the social part of the ceremony commenced. Everyone began to talk with each other in groups, while drinks were served for all. The Greens present attempted to get to know a little better the Yellows who were present. Both Lime and Lemon Squadrons, however, had become very popular. They attracted swarms of people, all of whom were figuratively dying to know all about their adventures in the other universe, as well as their actions during the recent battle. Jess very quickly expanded her email list by a significant degree, to accommodate all of the people she promised to get back to. The social encounters were particularly interesting for Kevin, because during the siege of the city he had commanded most of the people he was meeting now.

Another half hour passed, and finally people began to leave. The Acting Grand General waved the Greens over. Houle and his swarm of bodyguards led the Greens down into a bunker that lay beneath the grounds of the courtyard. The group went down a short tunnel, before coming to a small room with steel walls and hardly any furniture. This was where the marching stopped. The Acting Grand General turned to face the Greens. "I needed to converse this in a place that is secure," he explained.

"So, why are we here?" Skope asked. "And why do you not want the Yellows to know about it?"

"I may decide to let them know eventually," said the Acting Grand General. "But whether or not I do depends upon your success for failure in the mission I will now describe."

"Well, our interest is certainly piqued," said Kevin. "What's the mission?"

"The formation of the Green-Yellow Alliance has served to strengthen both Armies within it," said the Acting Grand General while beginning to pace and think aloud. "But now that there are six Armies involved in the war, I am concerned that it will not be strong enough, for we now must stand against the tides of the Purple, Red, and Orange Armies. This has been a difficult decision to make, but I do believe

that Richard Face, if he were here in my place, would have come to exactly the same conclusion."

It was Nome who figured out the Acting Grand General's plan first. "Do you meanâ€|the _Blues?_"

The Acting Grand General looked Nome straight in the visor. "You are just as perceptive as the others tell me. Yes, Nome, we are indeed going to attempt to bring the Blue Army into our Alliance. Or, to state it more accurately: all of you are."

Kenny coughed. "So, let me try to get this straight: you think that the _Blues_ can be an asset to us?"

The Acting Grand General nodded. "They will be useful because of their sheer numbers, not for their individual skill, of course. But any asset is a valuable asset, with the current situation standing regarding the war at large. We need all the assets we can get. The sooner that the newer three Armies have been put down, the better. And there is another reason: in light of events, the Green-Yellow Alliance will be hosting a war council in the coming days, to discuss our future plans for the war. I want the leader of the Blues to be there, in hologram or person, to plan with us. You see, the Blue forces will make excellent cannon fodder. And while I of course won't state it like that in front of the Blue Army's leader, I believe that I will be able to convince him to use his forces as a giant distraction during the coming battles. But _only_ if he decides to attend our war council, which he will not do unless the Blues join the Alliance."

For the Greens, this triggered memories of the assault on a Red Base in the Halothrii Wilderness more than a week ago. It had been a joint operation between the Greens, Yellows, and Blues. The Greens and Yellows had actually infiltrated the base, but the masses of Blues had stayed outside, instead serving as a valuable distraction which had caused the Reds to think they were under attack by a larger force than they actually were. Verbally taking into account what the rest of the Greens were thinking, Nome stated: "An idea is one thing, but actions are another entirely. How exactly do you expect us to broker an alliance between us and the Blues?"

"It's actually very simple," the Acting Grand General stated matter-of-factly. "You will all travel to the Blue Army's capitol world, Azure. There, you will head for the central sector of the planet, the province of Muffinia, and gain audience with the leader of the Blue Army. I have already sent a request to Muffinia regarding yourâ€|appointment. In a stroke of luck, Lord Blue has agreed to see you, though he has not yet decided about joining the Alliance. You will all speak to him and convince him to make up his mind."

Jess gasped. "_Ohmygod_, we're going to meet Lord Blue in _person?_"

"You heard me correctly, Specialist Retsis," said Houle.

Lord Blue was the name of the leader of the Blue Army. He resided in a great palace at the center of the province of Muffinia, which was said to be one of the most posh and lavish locations in the entire galaxy. Despite the reputation of the Blue Army, Lord Blue was still extremely well known and popular, if only because of his legendarily

ridiculous amount of pompous arrogance. He was always having pictures of himself raised in bases all over the galaxy, so that he could "bathe the galaxy in his illustrious Blueness."

Kevin crossed his arms. "Well, this should turn out to beâ€¦interestingâ€¦to say the least."

"Indeed it shall," said Houle. "As I have said before, whether I inform the Yellows of this or not depends on if Lord Blue decides to have his Army join the Alliance. The reason for this is that I have not actually consulted with the Yellow Army on this decision. I don't know if they would agree to allow the Blues to join. However, I have decided that it is completely necessary. So if Lord Blue does decide to join, then he will have done so before the Yellows know what is going on, and the Yellows will find it very difficult to object without setting off the Blues like a pissed off beehive. And on the other hand, if Lord Blue declines our offer to join, then I need not ever tell the Yellows that this operation took place, because everything will still be as it is now."

The Greens looked at one another as the Acting Grand General spoke. Houle was beginning to show his differences from Richard Face. Face had been well known as a pleasant and personable leader. He always gave trust where he felt it was due, and would never have decided to make decisions like this behind the Yellow Army's back. Houle was a different kind of character it seemed, even despite his attempts to live up to Face. But the results of the mission the Greens were about to embark upon would serve as a test of exactly how wise Houle actually was, because things could turn out either wonderfully or horribly depending on how things played out.

3. The Asteroid City

3 â€" THE ASTEROID CITY

The Avant Garde burst back into normal space with a flash, accompanied on its starboard side by the Edge of Glory. In the command dome of the capitol ship, Vorennius stared at the holographic projection of the front view of the two vessels. Indeed, they had arrived. The views he stared at showed a bulbous rock floating in space. It was shaped somewhat like a capsule or pill, with a long bar shape for its midsection, and ends that were round domes. Feelings of familiarity immediately greeted the Admiral. This asteroid was actually mostly hollow on the inside, and exhibited hardly any natural holes that led from its interior to space (the few small holes that did exist had been built over with titanium plating when the Purple Army had first discovered the asteroid). This had made it ideal for the construction of a base. Or perhaps a city, the Admiral then corrected himself. The distance from end to end of the asteroid was more than fifty kilometers, and the mean diameter of its cross-section was almost ten. The giant hollow space rock had been colonized by the Purples at the very start of the war. In the last three years however, this asteroid had become especially significant to the Purple Army, and would no doubt continue to be in the future.

Named after the sector of space it had been discovered in, the asteroid was called the Shell of Vins³th. After the Green Army had attacked Roster Teth three years ago, Vorennius had taken the Avant

Garde_ to this secret location and used it as a staging ground for his retaliation campaign. His secret fleets, as well as Purple civilians liberated from Green prison camps, had been taken here, and gradually introduced into the cause of retribution. Now that Roster Teth had been retaken, the asteroid was much less populated than it had been, since so many of its residents had moved back to the Purple capitol world. Yet even still, Vorennius expected perhaps ten thousand soldiers to still inhabit the interior of the hollow rock.

At about the same second, the _Avant Garde _and the _Edge of Glory_ transmitted identification codes to the Shell of VinsÃ³th. Then both ships accelerated towards the asteroid, one ship maneuvering on either side of the cylindrical midsection to access docking extensions strutting out in a ring. The _Avant Garde _slowed down, and then there was a subtle _thump_ which made everything jiggle, and was the signal that the electromagnetic clamps had grabbed hold of the ship. Thane accompanied Vorennius as he strode down to the airlock leading to the docking extension tube. He strode into a large chamber that looked upon a great steel door. There was a hiss of gas, upon which the two sections of the door began to slide apart. Beyond this lay a square shaped corridor that had windows looking out into space on all sides. And standing at the very front of it, revealed as the airlock door departed, was a company of a dozen Purple soldiers standing at attention.

The Admiral paced forwards. At once, the soldier at the very front walked towards him with excited steps. "Admiral!" he shouted. "I have been so greatly awaiting your return."

"Stendaar," said Vorennius as the two of them shook hands heartily like brothers.

Yoren Stendaar, the General of the Far Reaches of Purple controlled space, withdrew his gauntlet. "I have heard that you located and then attacked Centerpoint City."

"That is correct," the Admiral stated proudly. The group began to walk slowly down the corridor of the extension tube. "The city still stands, but only by a hair. And I have acquired something from it which will be extremely useful in the days to come."

"I have heard that there was a prisoner, yes," said Stendaar. "Someone important."

"The Grand General," said the Admiral.

Stendaar stopped and stared at the Admiral. "Can it be?" he gasped.

The Admiral nodded.

"The leader of the entire Green Armyâ€|and the one directly responsible for the fall of Roster Teth three years agoâ€|do you mean to tell me that he is now in _our_ custody?" The Admiral's gaze told everything. For an instant, Stendaar seemed almost as though he might hug Vorennius. But of course he did not, and he gained control of himself in the next moment.

"There is so much that we must discuss," said Vorennius. "But at a

later time. At the moment I must become situated here. And soon I mean to make an address to the VinsÃ³thian people.

Stendaar nodded. "Of course, Admiral."

The company had now come to the end of the extension tube and the shell of the asteroid. Another large door slid into the walls with a hissing of gas, and then the sight of the Shell of VinsÃ³th was laid open for all to see. A miniature cityscape stretched out before the Admiral. Short metallic buildings jutted up from the shell of the asteroid like resistors on a circuit board. Streets had been carved into the rock, and people were traveling about between the buildings, most of them walking because of the short distances, but others using vehicles such as Mongooses to get from one end of the shell to the other. Looking up, the Admiral recognized the ever familiar curve of the landscape, which arced vertically and then went all the way around in a circle, forming the cylinder that was the midsection of VinsÃ³th. If he looked closely, Vorennius could make out buildings and even people walking around, ten kilometers above him, on the opposite point of the circular cross-section. The asteroid was rotating around its cylindrical axis, creating centripetal acceleration that served the purpose of artificial gravity, and this was what allowed the VinsÃ³thian residents to use the inside surface of the shell as ground.

Vorennius and Stendaar strolled throughout the streets for some moments, just taking in the unique sights. It had been several months since Vorennius had last been to VinsÃ³th, though he had spent more than a year here during the time when he had been using the asteroid as his main command center. It still served mostly that role, of course, but less now that Roster Teth could share some of the load. After maybe ten minutes of walking, they came to the most prominent structure on VinsÃ³th: a purple colored steel tower which rose roughly one hundred meters above the ground. This was the capitol building of VinsÃ³th, and the place that Vorennius had taken residence in during his previous stays within the asteroid, and the location from which the Admiral had issued most of his commands leading up to the revolution on Roster Teth.

The company walked up a large and elaborate set of steps composed of polished steel painted in the colors of their Army. As they stepped into the lobby, two lines of Purple soldiers, forming a path leading down the room, snapped to attention and saluted in unison. The Admiral nodded in both directions. "At ease." He then walked brusquely towards the elevator, making to the top floor of the tower. It would be very nice to get set up in his old quarters again. The chambers of the Avant Garde had always been so confining. The Admiral was in the mood for something much more spacious, where he could wander and contemplate his plans.

* * *

><p>Vorennius had his things taken from the Avant Garde and placed in his room in the capitol building. Meanwhile, the Grand General was led out of the Edge of Glory and placed in a holding cell in one of the buildings used to house prisoners of war. Everything was proceeding smoothly. After a few hours had passed, the Admiral issued the order for the setup of an announcement he would make to all of the VinsÃ³thian people. He emerged from his quarters, took the elevator to the roof of the capitol building, and walked

towards the platform looking down towards the surface of the shell. Crowds were beginning to appear, already numbering in the hundreds.

He spoke into the microphone, which broadcasted his voice throughout the entire asteroid. "My dear Army," he said proudly. "Today is a momentous point in our history. Months ago, I left you with promises of a better future. I promised you that Roster Teth, our beloved capitol world, would be retaken. And I promised you that the Greens would suffer for their crimes against us. I stand before you now, basking in the light of glorious victory, for I have fulfilled all of these promises. A month ago, the Greens were wiped from face of Roster Teth, and the general in charge of their occupation has been hunted down and executed. The green colored pads you see me wearing now on my shoulders and forehead were taken from his armor, as a trophy of vengeance. And as for my promise to make the Green Army suffer, I have fulfilled this as well. As I am sure you are all aware, Centerpoint City was recently attacked. Though it still stands, it will never be as it was before. One of its districts has been completely annihilated. Its defensive walls, once thought to be unbreachable, now lie shattered and broken. Its civilian population has been vastly reduced. Yet even this is not all I have done to them. For now, the Green Army is without something."

The Admiral pointed to the building to the east of the capitol tower. It was a short and squat rectangle of a complex. Its front doors opened, and a platoon of guards came pouring out of it. And stumbling weakly and awkwardly in front of them, wrapped in a web of steel chains and clamps, was the Grand General of the Green Army, Richard Face. The Admiral heard the crowds gasp as they all laid visor on this prize. "Yes," the Admiral boasted with cunning maniacism. "Yes, my people! You see before you, the self-proclaimed leader of the Green Army. The man who, three years ago, led the genocide of our capitol world, nuked our cities, wiped out our communities, and all so that he could gain the position of leader for his own Army. We have him, at long last."

The platoon of guards led Face to the center of the square, where they chained him to a metal post. As he moved along the street, the platoon had to form a perimeter around the helpless Green, to prevent the crowds from mutilating him on the spot. The guards took each of his arms and legs and clamped it individually to the pole. Then they turned him so that he was looking in the direction of the capitol tower. The crowds were roaring with anger and hatred. "Murderer!" came shouts from all around the Grand General. "Genocidist!" "Traitor!" "Die!"

The Admiral looked down upon Richard Face. "What say you now, General?" he asked the Green mockingly. "I remember the day after Roster Teth, when you promoted yourself to the rank of Grand General. You said in a speech that the Green Army was assured victory for all time, that you could never be defeated because you had become simply too powerful." Down below, the crowds began to laugh. "What say you now?" Vorennius shouted at the Green. "Do you still think that your Army is assured victory? That your Army cannot be defeated?" One of the guards had taken out a purple pen and drawn a mustache in permanent ink on the Grand General's visor. This had the effect of making the crowds laugh even harder. The Grand General could respond to none of this, for the voice projector in his helmet had been purposefully deactivated by the guards. The Vins³thian people needed

a demonstration like this, the Admiral had decided. And they didn't need to hear the Grand General try to defend himself, for he had had all the opportunities for that during the Battle of Centerpoint City.

Soon, the crowds began throwing things at the Grand General, since the guards still wouldn't let them get close to him. Rocks, pieces of rotten food, and other materials all began to bounce off of the Grand General's visor in a hail. Fractures and cracks inevitably began to appear in his visor after awhile, at which point the Admiral ordered the crowds to stop. This required some actions from the guards, but reluctantly, the rain of small thrown objects eventually ceased. Yet now, the Grand General's armor was coated in dents and a layer of rotten food products which was slimily sliding down to the ground.

The Admiral continued speaking again: "It would seem that the Grand General has no response. He cannot speak for his actions. He once called his own Army undefeatable. Yet now, stripped of everything but his own suit of armor, he cannot even defend himself. He is nothing but a shame." A pall of silence had taken hold of the crowds. "I will tell you what cannot be defeated, Grand General. What cannot be defeated is the lust for justice, and for vengeance. What cannot be defeated is the unity that comes from fighting for the last pieces of your lost civilization—and the honor that comes with such trials. You see, Richard Face—men, soldiers, ships, cities—they can all die. But a people? Their ideas, their culture, their sense of unity? Those will live on forever, often changing forms but never becoming extinguished. Those, Richard Face, are the things that are truly undefeatable. You forgot that after you left Roster Teth in flames. You forgot that ideals never die. And now they have returned, in the form of the revolution that has restored Roster Teth, and in the form of the invasion of your precious Centerpoint City. And now, those same ideals have brought you here, before the Vins'athan people, and in the name of those ideals you will be made to answer for all of your atrocities against the Purple Army."

The demonstration was beginning to wind down, and it was approaching time for the Admiral to reveal his main purpose for assembling the crowds. The guards removed Face from the metal post, and then slowly led him back into the Prisoner of War Containment Complex. The crowds were a bit more tolerant as the guards directed Face back through the square, for there were less attempts to push through the perimeter to get at the Green. Once the doors on the complex building had shut again, Vorennius began to speak. He hesitated for a moment (a rare happening for him), because he wasn't entirely sure how to go about bringing up the next subject. _Do I really even want to do this, _he thought to himself. But then he remembered his encounter on the _Avant Garde_. _Then again, do I have a choice?_ He cleared his throat.

"Today also marks the occasion of another turn of events for our Army, one which, I believe, will allow us to attain a future of victory and prosperity. A few days ago, we were engaged in a temporary alliance with the Red Army. This alliance dissolved when their leader made an attempt on my life, over a misunderstanding regarding one of our agreements. However, as of the end of the Battle of Centerpoint City, this leader has been replaced by another, a new leader who promises to be—" The Admiral again paused, regretting the fact that he was about to say this. "Reasonable—" The crowds

were now all staring at Vorennius in complete silence, no one having any idea where he was going. "Given the fact that our alliance with the Reds proved to be extremely useful for as long as it was allowed to exist, I have spoken in person with him, and we have agreedâ€" " _Is there really no other way, _ he wondered silently. Then he spotted someone in the crowds down below, a figure clad in black. He was way in the back, such that most of the people down there were not able to notice him. He was staring at Vorennius intently, and nodding his helmet in approval of Vorennius' words. _I have to, _ the Admiral then realized. _This entity has forced my hand._

Suddenly, over the COM link in his helmet, he heard the panicked report that several Red ships had just jumped into the system. In a surprised stutter, the controller hastily described five ships, and one of them appeared to be over ten kilometers long, with the name _Instrument of Chaos. _The controller was about to initiate an alert, but using his tacpad the Admiral ordered the controller to silence the warning. Amnion was watching. This was the way it had to be.

By now, from the perspective of the crowds, the Admiral had appeared to be standing in silence for almost a minute. It was time for him to finish his speech, and bring about the turn that he sincerely hoped would not become the greatest mistake of his campaign. He continued: "â€"We have agreed to re-enter into our alliance. From this point onwards, the Red and Purple Armies will fight this war together."

There were surprised gasps from the crowd, which swept over everyone like a wave. At the same moment, the entire asteroid vibrated slightly, causing everyone to look around in confusion. All but the Admiral, who knew what was coming. From all areas of the shell came the hissing of airlock doors opening. And then came the sound of marching. As the VinsÃ³thian people watched in shock and wonder, platoons of Red soldiers, each numbering in the hundreds, slowly marched through all of the airlocks of the shell. Each step they collectively took sounded like a thunderclap as the noise reverberated throughout the interior of the asteroid.

"Today marks the beginning of a new era for both the Purple and Red Armies," said the Admiral. "For today is the union that shall break the cycle of the galactic war. Together, we shall bring the Green-Yellow Alliance to its knees. For too long, this war has cost countless lives all across the galaxy. The time to impose peace upon all of civilization begins now."

From all over the surface of the shell, the sound of applause started and began to grow. Yet the Admiral kept his visor on the black-clad figure, who was still watching him and nodding his helmet in great approval. Amnion put two fingers to his visor and then pointed at Vorennius, in an "I'm watching you" kind of gesture. And as the cheers descended upon him, the Admiral thought to himself: _What have I done?_

4. The Worst Movie Ever Made

4 â€" THE WORST MOVIE EVER MADE

The monorail settled gently into its docking bay. The doors opened, and an assortment of Green and Yellow soldiers emerged in single

file. First came Green Team, then Yellow Team, then Lemon Squadron, and finally Guy Dudeperson and Travis Chamaelon. The group began to spread out as everyone stretched their legs and admired the peaceful forest around them. They were on the other side of the ring of water from Centerpoint City, in the same ravine of forest that held the same teleporter they had all used to get here. Though they had only been at Centerpoint for just over two days, it now seemed like a year had passed. And looking back across the water, they realized that the city now looked nothing like it had the day before: it was partly obscured by a haze of dust and smoke. Many of the wonderful spires and towers were now gone, and the sea to the city's west was polluted with a mountain of metal, the remains of the Green capitol ship _Grand Castellan_, which had bravely fallen defending the city from the Purples.

Patton looked at the Greens. "Well medic, is this where we part ways again?"

"Yes, I believe it is. We now have our own matters to attend to, as I am sure you do yours."

"When will you guys be back?" Ryan asked.

"No idea," said Jess. "Our mission will take us across the galaxy. There's no way of knowing how long we'll be gone."

"Could you remind us what this mission is, again?" said Hearts. "You've all been rather vague in mentioning what it's about."

"Gathering data from one of our remote outposts in Blue territory," said Kenny quickly. "So that we can check reports of Purple, Red, and Orange activity."

"_Blue_ territory?" said Amber quizzically. "Why would you go to Blue territory to investigate activity for the New Three?"

Kenny gasped. "Uuuh, I meant Orange territory."

"The Orange Army doesn't really have any defined territory," said Clair. "They have like, one city on this planet. That's it."

Kenny stood awkwardly, not sure how to respond, and feeling very much under pressure. Thankfully, this was when Skope decided to jump in. "No territory _that we know of_, " he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "What we need to do is make sure that the Oranges don't really have any territory. Yet."

Clair shrugged her shoulders. "Well then, why're you calling it Orange territory, if you don't know that it's actually Orange territory or not?"

Now it was Skope's turn to stand awkwardly. "Figure of speech?" he said in an unusually high voice.

The Yellows began to look at each other.

Now Nome gave it a try. "We will be departing on a journey into _suspected_ Orange territory, which we do not actually know to be the territory for any Army, but possibly each one of them, and so by

definition, all ownership names applied to the territory are grammatically correct."

"That doesn't sound like it makes a whole lot of sense," said Tom. "But then I guess it doesn't matter. A mission's a mission. Shall we all head back now?"

The others obliged, and as one body they began journeying across the ravine. As they walked, Amber slowly got to the side of Skope. She then leaned close to him and whispered: "You guys aren't really going to do data collection, are you?"

Skope shook his helmet.

"I didn't think so," said Amber. "What are you really doing, then? Wait, let me guess: it's classified."

Skope nodded.

"And you really don't have any idea when you'll be back?"

Skope nodded again.

Amber continued: "Y'know, what happened that night in the hotelâ€¦I think that was a bit much. But I still doâ€¦y'know. Like you. And I feel like there's something more I need to say to you, but I just can't think of it."

The group reached the teleporter at that moment. Nome stepped forward and began to hit buttons on a hidden console while letting a scanner identify him. Then the familiar green colored pillar of light filled the frame. Single file, everyone began to step in. Soon only Amber and Skope were left.

Amber shrugged. "Since I can't think of anything else to say, I guessâ€¦be safe, wherever it is that you're really going."

Skope stared at the Yellow for awhile. And then, the two of them embraced. "You too," Amber heard next to her ear. The moment lasted for as long as it could (which was not as long as either would have liked, considering that everyone else was waiting for them on the other side of the teleporter). The two of them let go, then gave another look at each other, and stepped through together. They reappeared inside the communications tower of Green Base. And of course, the entire rest of the group was staring at them.

"Did you lovebirds have a good time?" Patton asked the Yellow and Green snidely. "And did you think that, somehow, we wouldn't all notice and wouldn't all get annoyed waiting for you here, with the teleporter hanging open like a flabbergasted maw?"

"Yesâ€¦sorryâ€¦" said Skope. "We were justâ€¦a little behind the rest of you, is all."

Amber was able to join the rest of the Yellows on the other side of the room. But Patton held Skope centered in his gaze, as though the Green were a piece of excrement that he had just discovered on a fancy rug. Skope was rooted to the spot for an instant that seemed to last forever. Then Patton bellowed: "Don't do anything stupid, Green." And with that, he led the group out the door and into the

canyon.

The familiar chirp of "spiked kittens" greeted everyone as they emerged into the outdoors. Beside Green Base stood a gigantic cubic box. It was in fact a great bomb that called itself Happy. Happy loved to cheer itself up, but would explode if its positive affect rose too high. This was unfortunate, because Happy, as its name implied, was made for the purpose of being happy. Several days ago, the Greens had decided to solve this problem by setting next to the bomb a looped recording of the phrase "spiked kittens" which would play over and over again, thereby keeping the bomb in a perpetual state of depression and preventing it from committing an enthusiastic and destructive suicide.

Or at least, that was what the recording was supposed to be doing.

As the group walked towards the bomb, they could overhear the voice of the bomb itself. "Now that I think about it, spiked kittens aren't actually so depressing," said Happy to itself in thought. "After all, the spikes would help keep the kittens safe from predators that want to eat them. Spikes aren't really so bad after all. In fact, I think they're pleasant. La-la-la! Oh, yes! Things are looking very wonderful indeed. The sun is out, the giant swirling vortex of doom is all snug in its containment facility, and there are butterflies in the air. Ah, what a wonderful world."

"The tape isn't working," Jess said frantically. "The bomb is cheering itself up!"

Ryan stared at his tacpad screen in horror. "Radioactivity is off the charts with that thing! We have to do something ASAP."

The Yellow and Green soldiers all made a mad dash for their respective bases. Of course, the Greens entered theirs first. Nome activated the keypad with practiced efficiency, and the Greens crowded into the elevator. After an eternity of waiting that was actually about ten seconds, the group sprinted into the hallway. Skope shouted: "Everyone, go to your quarters and search for something we can use to make the bomb depressed again. Hurry!"

A soldier in orange and red armor came out of one of the rooms. "Hey guys, you're finally back! What's happening?" Everyone pressed past him. "Whoa seriously, what's going on?" He was Fred Oofig, an armyless soldier that that Lime Squadron had encountered in one of the alternate universes, who had helped them in their mission and then agreed to join them. Before leaving for Centerpoint City two days ago, the Greens had left Oofig to look after the base.

"What have you been doing while we've been gone?" Kenny said to Oofig. "Have you been paying any attention to the giant bomb outside recently?"

Oofig shrugged. "Well, I assume the recording is keeping everything under control."

"It isn't!" said Kenny, before running into his quarters.

Everyone else, except for Oofig, was now in their quarters, pouring through their possessions in a frenzy to find something to depress

the bomb outside. "What about Twilight?" Jess asked from her room. "It can be kind of scary."

Kevin shook his head. "Are you serious?"

"Um, no. I guess not." From Jess' quarter came the sound of books hitting the floor.

Nome was the next to make a suggestion. He came into the hallway holding a very large textbook. "The Fundamentals of Population Psychology," he read off the front cover. "One of its sections is on neuroticism. If one of us were to read this to the bomb over and over againâ€¦" He trailed off when he saw a bunch of shaking helmets. "Ah, perhaps not. But fear not, Fundamentals of Population Psychology. I shall find a purpose for you eventually." He retreated back into his room.

"Ugh!" Kevin groaned from inside his quarters. "There's got to be _something!_" But from the sound of things, he wasn't having very much success.

"I HAVE IT!" suddenly came a shout from Kenny's room. He sprinted into the hallway, nearly smacking into Mr. Boom's chest plate as he did so. In his gauntlets he held a video tape.

"A cassette?" Kevin asked. "I thought those things were extinct."

"Except for things buried away and forgotten," Kenny corrected.

"How so?" Kevin asked.

Nome approached Kenny and studied the front cover of the video tape. "Invasion of the Zombified Mutant Lobster-Puppies From Planet Xordon, Part 1: The Unstoppable Laser of the NERD Alliance." The other members of Green Team suddenly felt an urge to slap their visors out of embarrassment from having even heard the name. Nome continued: "If I recall, this was a notoriously bad movie, nominated #1 Worst Failure of All Time by several review organizations from all Armies in the Big Three. Part 2 of the series was never made because this, the first movie, was an unparalleled disaster at theaters. In fact, I do vaguely remember hearing that this movie fails on so many counts that it can be described as an art form for all the wrong reasons. Storyline, characters, effects, plot, actingâ€¦all of it was so bad that the movie became synonymous with everything that could possibly be done wrong in a film."

Kenny nodded all the time Nome spoke. "Well, what do you all think?" he asked the group as soon as the medic had finished monologuing.

Jess shrugged. "Well, if watching it can be considered a form of torture, then watching it on a loop would probably prevent anyone from ever being happy again. I say we give it a try."

"I certainly don't see why not," said Kevin.

With that, the group raced back to the elevator, this time with Oofig along with them. Within seconds they were back outside. In addition to the tape, Kenny was also lugging a wireless cassette player. They

hooked it up to a flat screen monitor, inserted the cassette, and set up the machinery in front of the bomb. Then they all stepped back and hoped for the best.

* * *

><p>The scene opened onto a view of the moon in the Sol System. "Earth," said the Narrator in a very loud and serious voice. The camera panned in closer to the moon. Then suddenly it shifted drastically to one side, so that the moon was no longer in the camera. Behind the moon was a blue and green colored planet. "Earth," the narrator repeated. "There it is." The camera now began to pan closer towards the correct celestial body. "This planet is filled withâ€|humanity," the narrator continued.

The camera showed the scene of a great cityscape. A woman in Yellow armor stepped out onto an apartment balcony and shouted out: "Ah, what a wonderful spring morning!" In the process of saying that line, she accidentally inhaled a puff of smog and started to cough. The camera switched to a different perspective as the woman was right in the middle of her coughing fit.

A Yellow man was walking down a busy city street. "This is our hero," said the narrator. "His name is Flepton Balsach. Up until today, Balsach has been regarded as a perfectly normal person. But he is about to make a difference that saves all of humanity. But our story doesn't begin with him. It actually begins thirty two years before now, which is not the present, but is actually in the past of the present."

The scene then instantly switched to two people on a bed, without their armor on, lying on top of each other and groaning with pleasure. "This is Dick and Vagina Balsach," said the narrator. "They are currently making our main character, which is why this scene is vitally important."

And again the scene switched. The camera was looking down, upon a city of buildings that were plainly made out of clay. Many of them had been set on fire, and walking amidst the city were a plethora of creatures that had simply been photo shopped into the screen. "We now go two weeks into the future, from the present, which is also the future of thirty-two years in the past, so it's very future-ey. Humanity has fallen under attack from Lobster-Puppies from another world. The planet is in chaos." The camera went close-up on a women who suddenly started shrieking at the top of her lungs for some reason, even though there were no photo shopped monsters anywhere near her. She put her hands to her visor while screaming, put her face right in the camera lens, and then dropped to the ground and started rolling, supposedly out of some kind of fear.

Then the screen went black, and the single word FORESHADOWING popped up in red letters.

"We now return to our hero Flepton Balsach," said the narrator as the scene again darted to the view of a Yellow walking down a busy city street. "We are now back in the present," the narrator informed the audience. "Which is the future of the scene from the past and the past of the scene from the future."

* * *

><p>The giant bomb appeared to be stunned by what it was seeing. The Greens certainly were. The bomb had stopped talking to itself entirely, and all of its cameras were fixated in the screen as though it were so mortally disgusted by what it was seeing that it was incapable of pulling its vision away.<p>

"I suspected it would be bad," said Oofig. "But I had no idea it was going to be _this _bad."

"I think this really _is_ the worst movie ever made," said Skope while nodding his helmet in agreement. "It really can't get any worse than this."

The Greens heard the sounds of footbeats, and looked northward to see the Yellows jogging in their direction. "It looks like they've already got it under control, boss," Ryan exclaimed to Patton. "But I wonder what they're having the bomb watch." The crowd of Yellows came to join the Greens beside the bomb and in front of the monitor.

They stood transfixed.

"What in the _universe _is this?" Hearts exclaimed.

"How can something like this be made?" Clair asked rhetorically.

On the screen, a broad-shouldered General presented himself to the main character, Flepton Balsach. "Things got really crazy at the Battle of the Future of Two Years Ago," he told Balsach. "I, umâ€¦I'm pregnant. There's an alien Lobster-Puppy gestating inside my belly. But listenâ€¦I think we can raise it up to be a _good_ alien, instead of a killer. I'm going to name it Floppy, after your nickname, because you're so important to this story."

Everyone watching this unanimously buried their visors in their gauntlets.

"Turn it off," Amber protested. "Pleaseâ€¦_turn it off!_"

"I'm so sorry," said Kevin. "We have to keep it on, because it's the only thing that can keep the bomb in a non-happy mood."

Hester shook her helmet violently. "You mean to tell me that we have to keep this movie running continuously, while shouting all of these awful lines across the canyon!"

"We are so, so _very _sorry," said Kevin.

Everyone stood around for awhile more. But then the effects of being anywhere near the movie took its toll, and the Yellows trudged back to their base in annoyance. And with the bomb situation now under control, the Greens decided to do the same. They erected a tent ceiling over television, so that it would not get wet should it decide to rain. And then they headed back down into their base. It had been a long day. Not quite as long as the day when Centerpoint City had fallen under attack, but still a long day nonetheless. And tomorrow was likely to be even longer, because in the morning was when they would head out into space on their mission. Everyone took a place around the kitchen table, and miscellaneous foodstuffs began to crowd the tabletop. Oofig was very eager to hear everything that had

happened to the others during their time at Centerpoint City.

"I've heard so many things about the attack on the city," said Oofig. "I mean, what the heck happened?"

There was a moment of silence, because no one had any idea where to begin.

It was Skope who finally began to speak. "Fredâ€¦do you remember that story that we looked at last time we were here? The Legend of the Great War? That had the characters Aeon and Amnion?"

Oofig nodded. "Yeah, of course."

Skope gulped and said: "It's all true."

5. The Instrument of Chaos

5 â€" THE INSTRUMENT OF CHAOS

Off in the distance, the sight of the Shell of VinsÃ³th was a great grey capsule floating in space, and rotating about its longest axis ever so slowly. Hooked in alongside the capsule, hugging its outside, were four ships, two Purple and two Red. The Purple ships were easily recognizable as the Avant Garde and the Edge of Glory. The Red ships were slightly larger and more massive, and had to orient themselves to the asteroid at an angle so that they did not alter its moment of inertia. They were called the Ruthless Abandon and the Harbinger of Destruction. The former was a cruiser, the latter a destroyer. Yet there was a third Red ship stationed at VinsÃ³th, one which was much too massive to connect itself to the asteroid. At ten kilometers in length and more than two gigatonnes in mass, the Instrument of Chaos was the flagship of the Red Army. And being a mobile city with more defenses than any other known object in the galaxy, it was also the seat of command and power for the Reds. Vorennius had agreed to an alliance between the Purples and the Reds of his own will, though even if the Admiral had resisted, it would not have been any matter. The very presence of the Instrument of Chaos would have seen to that.

The bridge of the Instrument of Chaos was a large expanse of computer consoles and Red officers. It was a very wide room which had a subtle curve to it that bent around the nose of the ship. The center of the curve, at the back of the expanse, contained a giant throne of gleaming black chrome. All around the throne were great steel gears with sharp edges, which had skulls carved into the bolts at their centerpoints. The headrest of the throne was also a gear, but turned slowly enough that one would not get themselves caught in it. Behind the headrest gear was a fountain of blood red flame which illuminated the throne (and much of the bridge) in the color of glorious death. And sitting in the throne was a figure clad in jet black armor, which was so dark that it seemed to swallow up any light that got near it like a black hole. The Instrument of Chaos housed the literal seat of power for the Red Army, and on that throne sat Amnion, Lord of Insanity and Bringer of Chaos.

The Lord of Insanity sipped from a glass of pink lemonade that was so heavily colored that it looked red. Even though he was using a straw, the sounds of him slurping the drink carried all over the bridge.

There was eventually a slight lull in the rancorous sounds of refreshment. Amnion motioned over to one of the Reds surrounding him. "You, come here!"

The Red walked slowly over to the Lord of Insanity, and bowed before the black throne. "My Lourd, hou may I serve you?" he said in a European accent.

Amnion stared down at the Red. "Tell me, minion. What is your name?"

"Roderick Balderdash, my Lourd."

Amnion nodded. "Ah yes, the accent. _That's _why I keep you around."

Balderdash kept staring at the floor. "Um, yes my Lourd. Thank you?"

Amnion finished his goblet of red lemonade and had a servant stomp off to get more. He was capable of simply making more appear in his hands, but he was feeling particularly lazy at the moment, and was in the mood to watch other people do things for him. While he waited for the servant to return, Amnion glared down at Balderdash with mild interest. "Before I took control of this Army, you were Vincent's right hand, were you not?"

Balderdash looked up at Amnion and nodded. "Oi, yes, my Lourd, that is correct."

Amnion chuckled menacingly. "That fusion coil was an annoying little idiot, wasn't he?" Balderdash looked up at the black throne in surprise. Amnion continued: "Oh, yes. Always boasting about his plans to pop the universe and so forth. And I could get him angry so very easily! He always thought that he was the one in control, which I frequently took advantage of. I would set up one small set of events to set him off, just little thingsâ€"it's always the little things that tick off people the most, I've foundâ€"and like some kind of firecracker Vincent would just get so mad for no reason at all." Amnion cackled again. "Those were some fun times. But still, Vincent was quite a bit to deal with on a personality basis. And very incompetent. And difficult to control. I really am quite glad that I have supplanted him for good."

One of the Reds standing behind and off to the side of Balderdash shouted out: "Well actually, I didn't think Vincent was that bad."

Amnion swiveled his head instantly in the direction of the other soldier. "What?"

The other Red shrugged. "Well, it's true that he was angry, like, all the freaking time. But it was actually kind of entertaining. And somehow, Vincent was always able to use his anger to motivate himself and other to do things that probably wouldn't have gotten done otherwise, like, say, building the Red Fortress. Now that place is a piece of work, I'll tell you." He then raised his hand in thought. "Oh, and he would let us all have free muffins on alternating evenings. I mean c'mon, Amnion! What's wrong with free muffins, ey? Nice, squishy, sweet, bouncy muffinsâ€" "

Amnion's visor suddenly began to glow of a brilliant red light, and within the next instant a giant red laser beam erupted from the Lord of Insanity's head. The Red soldier was vaporized in that split second. The laser went by like a flash of red lightening, and when it had passed, the charred hands and feet of the Red (all that was left of him) fell to the metal floor with a bounce, and a small layer of ash began to coat them in the next moment. The rest of the crew on the bridge all jumped back in unison, their spontaneous fear being given away by their innate reactions.

"MUFFINS!" Amnion roared. "If there is any one thing I hate more than light and love, it is _fucking MUFFINS!_" He curled his gauntlets into fists in front of his visor. "I hate the way they taste, the way they crumble, the way they squish, they way they have those inane little fruit bits mixed inâ€|_eraggggh!_" He pounded his fists down on the black chrome armrests of his throne. "I have had nightmares about those damn things. The only thing I ever appreciate about themâ€|_the one and only thing_â€|is the thought of them burning. I want their cream to boil, their tender insides to charâ€|until nothing is left but ash and ember. Muffins are altogether an abomination with the universe itself! The very idea of muffins must be exterminated from the very fabric of existence. I HATE ALL MUFFINS!"

Everyone else on the bridge just stood and stared at the Lord of Insanity, being too afraid to do anything else. The silence was extremely loud. Eventually another Red mumbled meekly: "Holy shit, dudeâ€|"

Amnion looked back at everyone. "What the hell are you all staring at? Back to work!"

Everyone else in the room straightened up and briskly began moving about the bridge. After what had just happened, no one was about to question the Lord of Insanity. Amnion looked down and noticed that Roderick Balderdash was still kneeling before him. "My minion," said the black clad soldier. Balderdash looked up. "I've had quite enough talk of inane muffinry," Amnion stated. "I want you to go over to that consoleâ€|"yes that one over thereâ€|"and patch me through to the good Admiral. I have some business with him that needs to be discussed."

Balderdash got up from the ground and walked over to the console Amnion had indicated. That particular console actually was not the one for communications. Amnion was simply testing how long it would take Balderdash to figure this out. However, Balderdash somehow managed despite this, because within the next few seconds, the curved visor of a Purple helmet consumed the view screen at the front center of the bridge.

The servant finally returned with a fresh cup of red lemonade, and Amnion began to slurp on it just as he greeted the Purple. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Serious of the Purple Army." He followed this with a bout of slurping sounds.

"What do you want, Amnion?" Vorennius asked pointedly.

Amnion stretched out his arms as though he expected to hug something. "What, no hello? We just became buddy-buddies in an alliance, and the first thing you say to me is 'what the fuck do you want?' Why

Admiral, you wound me!" Vorennius shook his helmet and reached up to turn his end of the connection off, but Amnion immediately shouted: "Don't even think about shutting me out! I simply jest. The thing is, it's time we talk a little about something."

Vorennius stopped. "So then, what is this about? You have your alliance. I do not see why you think you still need to keep a presence in this sector."

"My ships will be off before long, don't worry," said Amnion. "But there is something I need from you first, concerning your Army's advances in technology."

Vorennius crossed his arms in front of his chest. "What do you mean?"

Amnion leaned forward in this black chrome throne. "Oh don't play dumb, Admiral. I know that your science teams are always working on something new. Despite your attempts to keep it secret, I know of many of your current projects. And I would like to take one with me."

Vorennius scoffed. "I don't think that will be allowed to happen."

Amnion laughed. "Not very respectful. Ah, how predictable you are, my good Admiral. Yet you forget that we are now bonded in an alliance—whether you like it or not—and furthermore, I have a flagship, a battlecruiser, and a destroyer surrounding your station. I can see why you might want to resist me—but I'm afraid that right now you just don't have the leverage. Oh, poor you!"

Vorennius stood silently for a moment. Then there was the sound of a fist pounding on a surface, and Vorennius said tersely: "What is it you want?"

Amnion chuckled. "There is one project you have in your asteroid city, in particular. An artificial intelligence that can control machines to a limited degree. In particular, I have made note of its ability to copy itself in a fraction of a second. There is a use I have for something which can do this."

"The Replicant AI," said Vorennius.

"Yes that one," said Amnion. "Supposedly it's extremely dumb, and can hardly even make something fire a weapon straight. But that doesn't actually matter, when considering how I plan to use it. If it can multiply itself almost instantaneously, then I want it."

The Admiral looked at Amnion quizzically. "Of all the projects, that one is your choice? Very well then. I had feared that your demands would be less—reasonable."

Amnion laughed. "I have myself a giant fleet of ships which I made out of literally nothing. I have an alliance with you. And soon I will have the galaxy in my thrall. I am capable of generating many things of my own power. But other forms of intelligence—well, let's just say that the concept and I have a rather complicated history. I can't really bring myself to make them anymore. And besides, if I wanted something from you that was less 'reasonable' than this, then

I would not have bothered asking. I would have simply taken it. Although, once you see exactly what use I have for this artificial intelligenceâ€¦I think you will agree that its design was a very good investment."

"Will that be all?" the Admiral asked.

Amnion nodded. "Yes, dear Admiral, that will be all. During my absolutely wonderful stay here at the Rotating Asteroid Resort, I have accomplished some pretty good things in life: I have established a brand spanking new alliance with your Army, I have provided a glorious display of my magnificent fleet, and I have placed an order for a potential weapon which, I believe, will revolutionize the war." The Admiral seemed to perk up at that last part. "So yes, my good Admiral," said Amnion. "That is all. I will get my AI, and then I will take my ships back to a certain Wilderness, and make it not-so-wilderness-like anymore. So start that diggity-download, because I have some plans for the other Armies. Hmhmhmhmâ€¦."

6. The Cucumber

6 â€" THE CUCUMBER

Nome walked down a corridor of white light. His first thought was to wonder if he had somehow ended up in the afterlife. But soon he began to garner a sense of place, though he still did not know where he was. All of the walls around him were very clear, and light traveled through the walls along currents, like brilliant wires, and this caused the wall to glow with some kind of sensation that Nome could not describe. He walked several meters further down this corridor, and soon came to stand in front of what looked to be a door. It was circular, and laid into a metal seal which took up the entire wall at the end of the hallway, much like that of a bank vault. In front of the door, there was what looked to be a locking mechanism, made of black chrome, with lots of sharp gears of pitch black metal that contrasted with the clean and bright aesthetics of everything else. In fact, the locking mechanism was attached to the shiny door almost like some kind of horrible parasite.

There was a hexagonal depression inlaid into the very center of the locking mechanism, a depth tracing of the polygon like some kind of circuit, with lines running through the center of the shape to indicate six triangular sections, one connected to each side. Nome walked slowly towards the door, as though he were in a trance. He eventually came to stand right in front of the hexagonal depression. Then he reached out with his left gauntlet, and placed it upon the depression. Instantaneously, the section of the shape at the 6:00 position lit up with a bright green light.

And thenâ€¦a ceiling.

The ceiling of his quarters in Green Base, to be more exact.

Nome blinked. Then he looked down at his arms and noticed that the tacpad on his armor was beeping. He got out of bed and walked over to it. He noticed from the many timepieces he had around the room that it was almost eight in the morning, so he figured he should probably dress in his armor whatever the case. But first, he opened his tacpad to investigate the beeping.

As he suspected, it was a message indicator. Someone had sent him a text message over COM. The message was from Kenny to everyone else in the base. It read DUDES, LOOK THE HECK OUTSIDE. THERE IS A GIANT CUCUMBER IN THE CANYON.

Perhaps I am still dreaming, Nome wondered inwardly. However, he did feel quite awake. But whatever state he was really in, he decided it was probably a good idea to look outside the base and see if, indeed, there really was a giant cucumber sitting out there. Stepping out into the hallway, the medic discovered that no one else was still in their quarters. He was apparently the last one to wake up, which was very unusual, since he had always woken up at exactly seven in the morning, to the secondâ€|until now, at least. Time to head outside then, to where everyone else probably was. As he made for the elevator, Nome reflected on the fact that he had had the dream of the hallway two nights in a row now. The first night had been immediately after the Battle of Centerpoint City. It was as though that event had triggered something in Nome's psyche. Nome stepped into the elevator as soon as its doors opened, and rode it to the surface. He walked quickly along the ramp to ground level, and came to find the rest of Green Team standing in a line, all of them looking at something in the distance.

A giant cucumber.

Or at least, that was what it looked like at first. A ginormous green colored object was floating above the canyon, holding at a height just greater than the canyon walls. As Nome looked at it more closely, he could tell that it actually had a metallic sheen. Also, many electrical lights were exuding from it, and he could even make out the windows of a cockpit at the object's tip. Another giveaway was the ion thrusters around the circumference of the cucumber's bottom facing section. It seemed that the giant floating cucumber was actually just a peculiar looking Green Army Corvette. However, it nevertheless did look very much like a cucumber. The ship was cylinder shaped, with a rounded tip. Nome estimated that that ship was one hundred and twenty meters long, and only about forty wide. This caused the shape of the ship to be very similar to that of a sausageâ€|or a cucumber, when its color was taken into account.

A hatch opened on the corvette's side, and a Hornet emerged from it, slowly floating down to the ground. After a moment, it came to hover a meter or so above the ground. There was a person riding passenger, a Green soldier. He hopped out and approached Green Team. Nome was the closest to him, so his gauntlet was shaken. "Lieutenant Clara Goodwater," the soldier said in a friendly manner. "You are Christopher Skope, is that correct?"

Skope nodded. "Um, yes mam. Could you pleaseâ€|explain what's going on?"

The Lieutenant seemed confused at first. But then she noticed what everyone else was staring at. "Oh, the ship! Of course. Yesterday, I do believe that the Acting Grand General gave all of you a mission to travel to the planet Azure, the Blue Army's capitol, to be granted an audience with their leader, Lord Blue." Goodwater pointed to the cucumber in the sky. "This is the good ship _Cucumber_. She is the vessel that will get all of you to Azure."

"That's a very appropriate name for the ship," said Kevin.

Goodwater nodded jovially. "Yes, I suppose it is. Anyways, I hope all of you are packed. If we're going to make it to Azure in timeâ€"and it's not a quick journeyâ€"then we will need to leave within the hour."

"I think we're about packed," said Skope. "Just a little bit more to stuff in here and there, but most of it was done last evening."

"Good, good," said Goodwater. "Well, when you're already, you can come onboard the ship. I am the second in command on the _Cucumber, _so please let me know if you need anything. Captain Gage is very eager to meet all of you, I'm sure. You've all become very popular of late, what with Lime Squadron and the battle at Centerpoint City and all."

"For better or for worse," Kevin mumbled under his breath.

The Greens brought out their luggage and stuffed it all into the passenger compartment of the Hornet, which then took it up as the first trip. Then came the time to get the Greens and Goodwater to the ship. There was enough room in the passenger's compartment for four, so the Hornet had to go through several trips to get everyone transferred. Everyone eventually ended up on the ship's hanger bay. It was perhaps the size of a glorified high school gymnasium, which was still very modest as hanger bays went, but understandable for a corvette class ship (the smallest class in the Green Army Navy). A few dozen soldiers and workers were standing at attention amidst a small plethora of vehicles, mostly Warthogs and Mongooses that were arranged in orderly rows.

"This way," Goodwater motioned, and the Greens followed. They exited the hanger bay through a cargo door, and then took a side passage which led into a much smaller hallway. Then they took an elevator to the crew quarters deck. Here the lights were warm, and the corridors were tight but felt very roomy. Dim fluorescent bulbs with a subtle orange tint illuminated the deck, giving the space the feeling of a cozy room with a fireplace, and the floor had a thin rug laid over the usual metal grating. Goodwater gave the Greens a short moment to set up their possessions in their quarters. No rooms were assigned, so everyone got to choose whichever one they wanted, but this didn't really matter since each room was an exact replica of every other room. The rooms themselves were very small, only large enough for one person each. They seemed almost like closets at first. There was space enough for a bed and a small table with a chair, as well as a very tiny chest of drawers (serving the purpose of a dresser, most likely).

It was not long before everyone was set up in their rooms (since there wasn't that much stuff the Greens had brought with them in the first place), at which point Goodwater saw fit to escort the group to meet the captain of the ship, whom she had mentioned was very eager to meet them. It was back to the elevator, and then up to the highest level of the ship. The next hallway was lit with green colored lights along the walls, which signified an area of high command. A set of automated double doors opened in front of the Greens, and then the bridge was revealed before them.

The room was shaped like a semicircle, with the curved side being the nose of the ship, and a long curved view screen set along it that looked outwards upon the Wilderness. A modest command chair sat in the center of the room, surrounded by a half dozen control consoles manned by the same number of officers. As the Greens entered the room single file (Goodwater being at the front), the chair slowly rotated, its face turning from the window and moving to look towards the Greens. In the chair sat a broad shouldered Green soldier wearing three medals on his chest plate. He rose from his chair and walked towards the Greens. "Number Two, are these the members of Lime Squadron?"

Goodwater nodded. "Yessir! Well, the Green members of Lime, that is."

The Captain nodded. "Yes, here they are." He reached out to the nearest of the Greens, who happened to be Nome. "I am Captain Nigel Gage, of the good ship _Cucumber._ Pleased to be at your service."

Nome returned the handshake. "I am Nome."

"Of course," said Gage. "You do have a last name, don't you?" Nome simply pointed to his impressively long name tag. "Good God," the Captain mumbled to himself upon reading it. "So that's why the media never talks about your name." He then realized what he was saying aloud. "Wh-um, I meanâ€¦you have an impressively long name, Medic Nome."

Nome nodded proudly. "Mmmmm, yes, indeed I do."

Gage then turned to Fred Oofig. "Um, I don't remember you being in Lime. You're notâ€¦an Orange, are you?"

Oofig shook his helmet strongly. "No sir, of course not."

"He's someone from an alternate universe whom we met during our travels," Jess put in, in Fred's defense. "He's with us and perfectly safe, don't worry."

"I see," said Gage with interest. "That should make for a worthy conversation some time." The rest of the group introduced themselves in a quick manner. Then the Captain resumed his position in the seat of his command chair. "I hope that all of you find this ship welcoming. It should be a fun journey. The _Cucumber_ may be a small ship, but she's fast, durable, and most of allâ€¦loyal. She'll get us between galactic arms in a heartbeat, just you watch." He turned his command chair to face the forward view screen and the crew at the consoles. "Well, I think the time has come for us to take off. We are on a clock, after all. Helmsman, fire the ion thrusters and prep the Slipspace Drive."

One of the soldiers at the console nodded, and a moment later the entire ship began to vibrate with a passion. Out the window, the canyon was quickly becoming smaller and further away. "You all might want to grab onto something," said Lieutenant Goodwater. "When this baby jumps, she can be pretty shaky." Out the window, the view soon became that of the entire continent, and eventually the entire planet, a gigantic blue-greyish marble surrounded by blackness.

Then everything was overtaken by a white light, and everything became Slipspace.

* * *

><p>Clair had never enjoyed her free time so much. In her early days at the Wilderness, she had always had too much to do and put up with. Endless chores that had given every indication of being eternal in nature. But she had managed to survive them. Usually, they had given her something to put her mind to. Cleaning rooms, cycling the laundry, repairing the Falcon and other vehicles in the motor pool, investigating shorted circuits in lighting, and of course tending to the occasional injury. It had been a load of stuff, to be sure, but nothing that would ever drive a person up a wall.<p>

Then had come Brian.

Clair had never hated one person so much in all her life (Travis Chameleon was a close second, but that was another story entirely). Brian had proved to be a walking disaster from the very first moment he had entered Yellow Base. He was always getting lost, breaking things, setting things on fire accidentally, and just generally making life impossible for Clair, who was always considered the "fix it" expert. Any small amount of free time Clair had managed to eke out in spite of her many duties, Brian had instantly destroyed with his constant catastrophes that always required instant attention. Not long ago, Brian had put a fully loaded magnum into the microwave and turned it on. This had soon turned the kitchen into a free-fire zone and destroyed the microwave, as well as several other pieces of equipment and furniture. Yet this had not been enough to teach the intellectually incompatible former Blue. Because only a few days later, Brian had come up with the wonderful idea of storing all his ammo boxes inside a hot oven. This kitchen disaster, Clair estimated to be the square of the first kitchen disaster. Because the oven had then annihilated EVERYTHING in the kitchen, much of which Clair had already spent many hours fixing. Needless to say, it would be a long time before she could ever muster up forgiveness for the imbecile of a former Blue.

Yet the stress of even Brian had not compared with another thing in the recent past: the Battle of Centerpoint City. It had been the first battle against non-Blues that Clair had ever participated in, in her life. She had first traveled with the rest of Lime and Lemon Squadrons as they journeyed through the Western District. But before long, that region of the city had fallen, and Clair had watched as thousands of homes were obliterated. Once she had gotten back to the Capitol District, she had then served as a mechanic, but this had not lasted long, as the Green Army turned out to need help with the wounded much more than it needed technicians. And so she had become a medic, working alongside Nome for much of the time. There had been more wounded and dying than the team of medics could save, and because of this, Clair had ended up with the task of bearing the black marker. She would go around to all the patients, estimate if they could be saved or not, and if they could not, she would draw an X symbol on the top of their helmet, which signified that they had to be left to die, because the priority was only those who could certainly be kept alive. Ever since that terrible day, Clair had struggled not to think of how many she must have sentenced to death. She was afraid that she could count the number, because she remembered in vivid detail every single X that she had drawn. But she

dared not, because the dozens of symbols swimming around in her memory tormented her.

Yet after the Yellows had returned to this base, FINALLY, Clair had gotten her free time. The reason seemed to be that everyone (including Clair) was extremely tired out. No one wanted to do anything productive for a while, and consequently nothing needed fixing on Clair's part. And so, here she sat, in the swivel chair of the monitoring room. She had always enjoyed being by herself. She had brought a few books with her, even though she usually ended up being entertained by just watching the monitors that viewed the rest of the base. There were even cameras looking on the inside of everyone's quarters, though they did not know it (because Clair had been in charge in installing all security cameras, and had decided not to inform the others of the ones in their quarters). Whenever she'd had free time, Clair had come up to the security monitoring room and just watched everyone else. It was really quite amazing how entertaining it could be. From observing Ryan's many private exclamations while he watched Star Wars: The Clone Wars, to Amber having conversations with a fusion coil (during the time when Vincent had secretly been in the base), the things that Clair saw through the cameras had yielded a wonderful amount of entertainment.

At the moment though, Clair was actually watching something outside the base, in the sky above the canyon. A great green cucumber-shaped object, which she had soon realized was actually a Green Army ship of some class, was lifting off into the atmosphere. Clair had just watched a lone Hornet take the members of Green Team up into the ship, a few at a trip, and then seen the ship engage its thrusters about ten minutes later. The role of the ship was, no doubt, to take the Greens to whatever mission it was that their Army's Acting Grand General had personally briefed them on. Clair had briefly wondered if, perhaps, she should notify the others in the base that there was a ginormous flying object in the canyon. But then she had decided against it, since the floating cucumber was clearly not a threat, and so the other Yellows hadn't needed to know. And in any case, the ship was gone now. It had taken the Green Team with it into Slipspace.

With that bit of watching now over, Clair decided to observe some internal affairs within the base. As usual, Ryan was in his quarters watching Star Wars with an insanely large bowl of buttery popcorn. Amber was also in her quarters, polishing her sniper scope lenses. Clair then switched on the feeds to search for Brian, and soon discovered that he was fast asleep in his bed, which was good, because it meant that he wouldn't be setting anything on fire accidentally. With that in check, Clair then took a peek at the feeds for the kitchen. As she expected, Lemon Squadron was gathered there, all sitting around the table and talking while drinking lemonade. In between battles, it seemed that Lemon did little else (they appeared to appreciate free time must as much as Clair did).

At the moment, everyone in Lemon were all listening to Patton, and with great interest. Patton was sitting in his chair with a greatly slouched posture, as though he was very tired and hadn't been sleeping well (Clair did not blame him, after Centerpoint City). He had some pencils and a piece of paper, and he was drawing something for the rest of the group. Clair zoomed the camera in to take a peek at it. On the paper, Patton had outlined a hexagon, with lines going through its center to distinguish six triangular sections, and he had

colored in the section at the 4:00 position with a bright yellow.

7. Some Fuel Barrels And A Plan

7 " SOME FUEL BARRELS AND A PLAN

An inverted hail of automatic fire assaulted the Pelican as it descended through the atmosphere. Bradley Patton grasped onto the dashboard as the VTOL shuddered madly. "What the hell is going on?" he shouted. "I thought you said you had the site under control!"

"We did," the pilot informed him. "But the energy signature must be broadcasting on a very easily detectable frequency, because just ten minutes ago, a whole battalion of Blues came from out of nowhere. The whole place is under siege."

Bradley gave the pilot a confused look. "I was unaware that our Army was on a bad standing with the Blues. When did we enter a state of conflict?"

The pilot shook his helmet. "Lord High Commander General "I think you might as well ask the Blues. Far as anyone can tell, it's because we want whatever is broadcasting the signature, and so do they. Thus, we have conflict."

Bradley nodded. "Mm, I see. Dammit. This was supposed to be a simple retrieval mission " The Pelican suddenly shook violently as another flurry of flak hit the bottom of the craft. "Argg, will you land this thing already!" he yelled at the pilot.

"We're almost there, sir!" the pilot shouted back. The Pelican turned sharply, and then, off in the distance, could be seen the spot of the battle. The largest ocean of XBOXL1V stretched beyond the windshield. And rising from the surface of the water was a great seastack. The two longest sides of the seastack were much taller than its midsection, such that they formed a wide ravine that stretched through the landmass. A crack in the ground traced a path directly through the center of the ravine, separating the area into two regions. The region on the Pelican's left side held two small circular bases, which were situated at either end of the ravine. Between them was some strange looking satellite antenna and several dozen vehicles, as well as a swarm of probably more than a hundred Blue foot soldiers. On the Pelican's right side, across a bridge from the two bases, sat a grand metallic structure that dominated that entire half of the ravine. Arms of steel formed a wall around a platform with a Plexiglas floor. This was the Yellow's stronghold in the battle. A row of Yellows stood at the perimeter of the platform, firing off at the other side of the ravine.

As Bradley's Pelican accelerated towards the great structure, the Blues began to make a push for the bridge connecting their side of the landmass to the Yellow's. In response to this move, the Yellows near the bridge suddenly shot backwards and hid behind rocks, just a second before the bridge exploded into pieces, which fell down into the water, taking some Blue soldiers with them. Bradley's Pelican finally reached the Yellow stronghold, hastily coming in for a landing. Bradley hopped out instantly. Yellow soldiers were sprinting all around him, moving between battle stations to try to keep the

Blues at bay. All around the perimeter of the platform, explosions caused the ground to shake. Bradley looked across the structure, searching for the Gunnery Sergeant he had placed in charge of the Yellow Company. He saw, nestled into a corner of the large platform, a small firebase that had been hastily fashioned together out of whatever the men had managed to come up with. Bradley raced towards it without hesitation.

The firebase was barely more than one small room. Some cameras and consoles lined the walls. In one of the corners, staring frantically at one of the monitors while shouting orders into a COM set, was Miles Adams. Bradley raced towards him and put his gauntlet on the Gunnery Sergeant's shoulder. Startled, Miles jolted and whirled around. "So sir, it's you!" he exclaimed.

"Gunnery Sergeant!" Bradley shouted at him. "What the hell is going on?"

"The Blues started attacking from out of nowhere, sir!" Miles shouted. "There are so many. I'm not sure we can hold them off for much longer!" Then he perked up. "The Gleam of Dawn is still above us. Surely they're sending reinforcements!"

Bradley looked at the Gunnery Sergeant a moment, then shook his helmet. "Just after I had left the frigate in that Pelican—" He pointed outside. "A gigantic Blue ship called the Wondermuffin jumped into orbit and started assaulting her. The Gleam of Dawn had to retreat to Slip-space. I can't get them on COMs, and all that I could do was come down here. There will be no reinforcements. At least, not for awhile. Not until the Gleam of Dawn figures out what to do about that Blue carrier."

Miles looked down at the floor. "Well, shit—"

Bradley shook him. "I mean, shit sir!" Miles shouted.

Bradley let the Gunnery Sergeant go and began to pace the room as more explosions sounded from outside. "This is what I get for sending my forces in advance. Dammit, how did the Blues know about the energy signature? They're not smart enough to have discovered the frequency. I never expected this—thing—to be so contested, especially since none of us even know what it is yet."

"So what do we do, sir?" Miles asked.

Bradley walked back outside. Everyone was facing away from him, looking out from the edges of the platform to the other side of the ravine, and the battalion of Blues. Bradley almost tripped over some fuel barrels as he marched. He picked himself up again and started to move—but then stopped, because an idea had struck him. He flagged down one of the nearby soldiers, who stopped running and approached the Lord High Commander General. "Private, how many of these barrels do we have?" he asked.

"Um—" The Private thought for a minute. "Maybe five dozen. I think there are more stashed in the back of the firebase."

"And do we have any propulsion cannons left? The ones that use a graviton field to launch objects across large distances?"

The Private nodded while counting on his fingers. "Two, three, four!" He nodded to himself. "Four, sir. There are four left. That are still undamaged, at least."

Bradley put his arms to his sides. "Good. Bring them all out. And the stashes of fuel barrels too. I have a plan."

The Private nodded with sudden hope. "Yessir! At once!" He sprinted into the firebase.

Bradley then turned to the perimeter of Yellow soldiers around the platform and shouted at the top of his lungs: "ATTENTION!" The mass of Yellows immediately dropped what they were all doing, stood tall, and saluted in unison. "The situation is bad, make no mistake," said Bradley seriously but strongly. "But we were all sent here to search for something that could bolster the resources of our Army. To find something that could alter the future of the entire fucking war. And we were sent here to do it under orders by the leader of our Army himself, Supreme Lord Commander General Victarion Halcor."

Everyone was definitely listening now. Even the Blues, on the other side of the island, seemed to have realized that something important was taking place, because their strikes had begun to lessen in frequency. "Now, look at yourselves," Bradley continued. "You are standing atop what could possibly be the greatest discovery in the history of the war, and yet you refuse to attain it. And why? Because Blues are attacking you. Now, are you seriously about to let _Blues _stand in the way of history? _The Blue Fucking Army?_" Bradley looked each of the soldiers directly in the visor as he walked along the perimeter of the platform. "Listen. We are going to succeed. We are going to succeed because we are facing Blues, and also because none of you will ever be able to live with yourselves if we fail, or even live at all. And also, we are going to succeed!" because I have a plan!"

This was the moment when the Private returned, driving a Mongoose that had a massive wagon attached to its backside, which was carrying a mountain of fuel barrels and four circular devices, the Man Cannons.

"We are going to succeed by giving the Blues hell," Bradley explained. "Each squad will take a man cannon and activate it, then aim it at a group of enemy vehicles on the other side of this ravine. And then!" you are going to make the sky rain fire!" He pointed at the fuel barrels. "The Blues, being Blues, have amassed a huge number of ground-based vehicles that they can do nothing with, because there is no longer any bridge. So what they have instead is, effectively, a mass of engines that all need exploding. And what better way is there to explode an engine than with _fire!_" Some of the soldiers began to whoop and clap, now realizing exactly where Bradley was going. "This is our moment in history," Bradley shouted. "And now, it is time for us to take it!"

The soldiers began to rush forward, each squad leader taking one of the Man Cannons, setting it at one point on the perimeter of the structure, and turning the device on. Meanwhile, the other members of the squad all accumulated their share of fuel barrels and loaded them up in front of their respective Man Cannons. Bradley crossed his arms and waited until all the squads were ready. Miles came to stand by his side and watch. "That's a good strategy, sir. Not sure how I had

forgotten: whenever you're stuck in a situation, first thing to do is blow shit up and see what happens."

"It's textbook, of course," Bradley stated.

All of the squads had now set everything up. "Ready to give the Blues hell, sir?" Miles asked.

Bradley nodded, then turned back to the squads and shouted "FIRE!"

The Man Cannons opened up, and the entire structure became a fountain of doom. One after another, the barrels hit their targets, splashing fuel all over the plethoras of Blue vehicles. Then the squads opened up with precision weapons to target the puddles, and the other half of the ravine erupted into an explosion of fire. The sounds of engines exploding and the sight of Blue bodies flying all over the place signaled victory—at least for now, until the Blues sent reinforcements from their overhead carrier. _But this,_ Bradley thought to himself, _this is how you win a battle—

* * *

><p>A bluish marble the size of a beach ball flashed on the forward view screen of the Instrument of Chaos. The Red Army flagship was still in slipspace, but one of the things Amnion had cleverly modded into the ship's systems was the ability to project images of the surrounding plane of realspace into the scanners. And so, Amnion could stare at XBOXL1V, and no one would have any idea that a Red armada had surrounded the puny world's gravity well. After spending its time at the hollow asteroid that Vorennius now called home, the _Instrument of Chaos_ had gone into slipspace and headed straight for the center of the Six Way War. The giant ship, as well as the other craft in the fleet it led, had traveled through the galaxy at speeds that the other Armies would have found unfathomable. Amnion had designed the _Instrument of Chaos_ to have superreactors that could make energy out of nothing whatsoever. This of course violated the physical Law of Conservation of Energy. But Amnion was the Lord of Insanity, so he had no reason to care. It was this limitless power which allowed all Red ships to travel across the fathoms of space in the blink of an eye, and to overwhelm whichever planet they chose.

Amnion watched the unsuspecting world, while seated in his throne of black chrome lit by red fire. The crew of Red soldiers on the bridge could practically feel the anticipation and bloodlust rising within their Army's Dark Lord. "BALDERDASH!" he suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs. His voice was sent into the speaker system of the entire ship, taking his exclamation to every sector of the supercruiser and scaring the bajesus out of its entire crew.

Maybe two minutes later, the plump Red soldier raced into the bridge and came to stand, panting, before the Black Throne. "Reporting for duty, Dark Lord," he exclaimed in between breaths.

"Are the supersoldiers ready?" Amnion asked sinisterly.

Balderdash nodded. "Yes, Dark Lord."

Amnion crossed his arms. "Good, good—I want them sent to a few

small outposts, for the first phase of the conquest of this world. Just to make sure that the Replicant AI is working properly. Once we know it is, then my specialized minions can be sent to all sectors of the planet, and shall lead the assault."

"Which base shall come first, my Lord?" Balderdash asked.

Amnion pulled up a holographic list, which was emitted from a holoprojector on the right armrest. The list had all the small scale bases for XBOXL1V. "What about a Green one?" "nah, there are none that look unsuspecting enough. Aha, the Blues! I'll take one of their bases, if only to lessen their muffinous influence over this world. I've never understood the Blues, with their muffin-obsessed culture. I don't like the smell of warm muffins. But _vaporized_ muffins, now there's a scent I love to wake up to in the morning. The Blues it is, then. Send out my superminions!" He then clasped his gauntlets in sudden thought. "Ah, but there is one more target I require as well. At Centerpoint City, that Lime Squadron did prove rather troublesome. I should perhaps send an attack on their canyon base—but there is another, larger base even closer. I think it best to destroy that, and then lure Lime into it. Yes, that's perfect!"

Balderdash nodded. "Good, a Yellow base. And along with that, which Blue base will be first to die?"

Amnion planted his finger over one specific base for no reason in particular. "Kill everything here, especially if it is responsible for baking muffins! Our domination campaign in this sector shall begin with the extermination of that treacherous pastry! And meanwhile, Lime Squadron will serve as a test for the power of my Agents of Death!"

8. The Legend of Aeon's Chosen

8 " THE LEGEND OF AEON'S CHOSEN

Life at Yellow Base had appeared to be more or less normal by the time everyone had settled in over the night. This was really quite miraculous, given what everyone had been through at Centerpoint City. But nevertheless, life resumed much as it had before. The familiar cycle of shifts was reinstated, operations resumed, and Brian continued to be the center of mishaps.

Meanwhile, Ryan was busy checking his laptop, which he had forgotten to do until just this morning. The first thing he did on it was to check on the popularity of a video he had taken about a week ago of the Green named Kevin. The leaders of the old team Kevin had been on had actually been Blues in disguise, and had ordered Kevin to take all his armor and clothes off because they thought he had died and was a ghost, and could therefore walk through walls and infiltrate Yellow Base. This strategy had of course completely failed, but in doing so had also made an excellent video. Ryan logged into his account on YellowTube and checked the status of the video.

He suddenly gasped.

To his astonishment, the video now had eighty-one million views! Out of disbelief, he refreshed the page, and sure enough, the number of views increased by a couple thousand. "Hey guys!" he shouted out into

the hallway. "Come in here!" Amber and Clair were the first to barge in. Ryan pointed at the screen.

Amber exhaled and Clair just stood dumbfounded at the screen. "That's crazy," said Amber.

"Well, it's a good thing that Kevin is off on some trip right now," Clair remarked. "Because that means no one here can tell him about this. He'd probably flip the hell out."

Hearts happened to be passing by in the hallway. He poked his helmet in. "Hey guys, what's going on in here? Oh yeah, that must be the vid of that Green getting undressed in front of this base—holy shit, it has over eighty million views!" He ran off down the hallway.

After a moment, several hoof beats could be hear roaring down the corridor. Hearts returned with the rest of Lemon Squadron. "Well, well, what's this?" said Patton. "Wow, it actually does have eighty million views!"

"Did this happen right before we first came to this base?" Wren asked.

Clair nodded. "I think you guys missed it by about an hour."

Wren covered her visor in her hands. "Ugh, I can't believe it! So close!"

"I need to upload more videos!" Ryan shouted determinedly while pointing his right hand in the air for no apparent reason. Then he hits the UPLAOD button on his account page and chose a file. "Yes, this one is just as good. Maybe better."

"What're you uploading?" Tom asked. "I think the one with the Green is kind of a hard act to top."

Ryan turned briefly to face the others hovering over his shoulder. "Y'know how, yesterday, Green Team discovered that their huge bomb outside their base was getting itself happy again and about to blow up, and they solved the problem by finding the worst movie ever made and forcing the bomb to watch it?"

Hearts gasped. "Do you mean Invasion of the Zombified Mutant Lobster-Puppies? Please tell me you're not uploading anything from that horrible movie!"

Ryan shook his visor. "Not from the movie itself. It's actually a clip showing the bomb watching the movie. The Greens set the player's volume really high, so it's just blasting those stupid lines across the canyon. Anyways, earlier this morning I headed over to Green Base's entrance structure to investigate, and managed to record this:" The clip had finished uploading by that point. Ryan clicked on the link that had just appeared, and soon the entire group was able to see what Ryan was talking about.

The screen showed a picture of Happy the Giant Bomb. Only, this time Happy really didn't look so happy. In the background, behind and to the side of the camera, came the sounds of badly voiced cliché lines mixed with overacted feminine screams. But the bomb was the

real focus. Its smiley face symbol had turned upside down into a horrified frown. All of its external viewing cameras were centered on the movie and shuddering. The bomb was so horrified and transfixed by the movie that the scene was actually kind of cute.

"Well that'sâ€¦different," said Hester.

"I still think the vid of Kevin stripping in front of the base is much better," said Wren.

Patton straightened up. "Well, it's nice to know you've got yourself a life on YellowTube, Hobar. If this is all there is, I think I'll head back to my lemonade."

"Oh, hang on guys," said Ryan.

"I've seen enough of your videos," Patton insisted.

"This might actually be important though," Ryan exclaimed.

Lemon turned back to face him. "Would it have been too much for you to start with the important part?" Hester asked.

Ryan put his hands up. "That's a point. But the thing is, I've been doing some research about the story of the Great War. Ever since we met Amnion and he nearly destroyed Centerpoint City, I can't stop thinking about it. I mean, so far, damn near everything about the Legend of the Great War has come true."

Patton crossed his arms. "Hobar! I don't care for kid's stories. Just listen to yourself."

"He called himself _Amnion!_" Ryan almost shouted. "And you saw what he did! He made spikes come up from the ground, and buildings eat people! How else do you explain that!"

Patton stopped. "Wellâ€¦we saw lots of things that dayâ€¦"

"OH COME ON!" Ryan whined in his loudest tone. "Are you serious?"

"I want to hear what Ryan has to say!" Clair suddenly butted in. Lemon turned and stared at her. She and Amber had just been standing in the side of the room for the last two minutes, just watching the back and forth between Ryan and the ever moralistic Lemon Squadron.

"Sinclair?" Patton asked with a confused tone.

Amber nodded. "I want to hear what he has to say also. You guys aren't giving him a chance."

Patton just stared at the two of them. "Butâ€¦why?"

Deryn put his hand on Patton's shoulder. "You are being a little hard on Ryan, don't you think? He was there too, as were all of us." Patton was staring at Deryn straight in the visor. "And to be honestâ€¦he's right," she continued. "What we all saw cannot be explained in terms of any technology we know of. And the connection between the Amnion in the Legend and the Amnion at Centerpoint City is just too large to ignore."

Hearts nodded. "I agree too, Pinkie. I want to hear what Ryan has to tell us."

"Specialist Hobar," Hester ordered to Ryan. "What research have you conducted? Show us."

Ryan gratefully nodded, then hit a few keys on the laptop. "Okay, so recently I've been searching the web for all things relating to the Legend of the Great War. Most of what I could find was just a repeat of that creation story book Nome showed us. But after looking awhile, I found something more." He pulled up a picture of several metallic engravings. "These plates have been found scattered around the explored galaxy, on many different worlds. They were all stored within ancient structures covered with giant green crystals."

"Like the crystals we all saw from the vortex on that Green frigate _Dark Side of the Moon_?" Amber asked.

"The very same kind," Ryan concurred. "It's like these plates have all been hidden away for a very long time. And after visiting the website of the publisher of that children's book, I found out that they actually paraphrased the Legend from the text on the ancient plates."

Lemon had begun to lean closer. "Well, now things are getting interesting," said Hearts.

Ryan continued: "So I looked up what the text was on the plates themselves. It turns out that the children's book, unsurprisingly, left a lot of things out of the actual story. On the plates, there was a lot more regarding the period of the Great War, that wasn't covered in the children's book."

"Something that can help us bring down Amnion, I hope," said Amber.

Ryan nodded. "So, if you guys remember, Amnion went insane after realizing the creators of the universe had abandoned it. He attacked all of creation, sparking a terrible war. Aeon, once Amnion's counterpart and sibling, took the side of humanity, and eventually created a resistance movement against Amnion."

"We know all this already," said Deryn. "Where's the new stuff?"

"Getting to it," said Ryan. "Here's the part the children's book didn't cover: it turns out that aside from Aeon and Amnion, there were also many lesser deities, each of which had been bestowed with special tasks regarding the management of the universe. During the Great War, most of them sided with Aeon and human civilization. In particular, six of them took the role of Aeon's generals. At the very end of the war, when the conflict between the two sides resulted in the death and rebirth of the universe, the plates say that both Aeon and Amnion were imprisoned within realms of crystal. Both require special powers in order to be opened. We already know that Vincent's abilities were enough to open Amnion's prison. But the plates say that Aeon's prison was far more guarded, because Amnion's hatred of him was so great at the end. Amnion intended for Aeon to be imprisoned indefinitely. But Aeon had one final trick up his sleeve,

so to speak: he had placed a flaw in the seals of his prison, such that if his six generals should reunite, their combined strength would be able to break the locking mechanism and free him."

Hearts was nodding along as Ryan spoke. "So it sounds like what we need to do is find these six demigod generals, then find Aeon's prison, and then get the generals to open the prison. Sound's easyâ€|but it's not, is it? I can see a look in your visor."

Ryan was shaking his helmet. "There's one final bit regarding the generals. It says that after the universe was reborn, each of the generals lost all memory of who they were, and most of them had their powers go dormant because their abilities were memory activated. This is where it ends, unfortunately. The plates say diddly shit about the identities of the generals, or where they are. It seems to hint at one point that they are in our universe. But I'm sorry to say that even if they are in our world, we still have no means of finding them, because they could be anyone and we would have no way of knowing. And nor would they, since they've lost their memories."

Hester had her arms crossed. "Hm, yup, that's quite a complication all right."

"So what do we do, then?" Clair asked.

"No idea," Ryan admitted as he shrugged.

The group just stood in silence for awhile.

"Oh, I should see how my latest video is doing on YellowTube!" Ryan suddenly exclaimed. He pulled the webpage of his YellowTube account back up and quickly checked the status of the video of the bomb watching the movie at Green Base. "Wow, ten thousand views already!" He then checked the status of his most prized video, the one of Kevin stripping in front of Yellow Base. "Oh my God, it jumped by another million as we were talking! Eighty-two M now! Hell yeah!" He fist-pumped the air.

Clair said: "You know, the fact that things like Greens stripping in public are what garner the most popularity from Yellow Mediaâ€|that's really kind of sad. Am I the only one who thinks this?"

"Not in the least, Sinclair," said Hester.

Lemon stood up and turned as a group, about to leave, when suddenly everyone's COMs started to beep frantically. Hearts was the first to answer his. "Hello? Yellow Command, is this you?"

"Yellow Command," said a young male voice. "Is this Lemon Squadron?"

"It is," said Hester, just after she flipped open her own COM. "Who is this? And where is Bradley?"

"I'm Johnson Avery," the voice on the other end said. "Bradley's second in command on the station. Bradley himself is out right now, on some kind of mission."

The members of Lemon looked at each other when they heard the last

bit. It was very unusual for the commander of a space station to suddenly just leave on a mission that no one else had been told about. "What is the purpose of this message?" Deryn asked.

"A Yellow Base not too far from the Wilderness is being besieged by the Reds," said Avery. "You guys are the closest to them, and you need to head there immediately. The base could fall in a matter of moments." Everyone's HUDs were updated with a set of coordinates.

"We've got it," said Patton. "We're on our way. Oh, but one more thing: do you know anything about the mission Bradley is out on?"

"Nothing whatsoever," said Avery. "The file has top level classification placed over it, which means that it must have come from the Supreme Lord Commander General Victarion Halcór himself. It seems damn important, whatever the heck it is. But um, if you don't mind me saying, you guys have a rather pressing mission to be on yourselves. I recommend you hop to it. That base isn't going to defend itself."

"We know," said Hester. "Lemon out." Everyone deactivated their COMs.

"Do you need any of us to go with you?" Amber asked.

Hester shook her helmet. "That will not be unnecessary. It's just base defense. Nothing that any member of Lemon hasn't done numerous times before." The other members of Lemon nodded in agreement.

Ryan shrugged. "Well then guysâ€¦I guessâ€¦"

"We will, don't worry," said Tom. And with that, Lemon got into Be There ASAP Mode and instantly began to sprint down the hallway in a line at top speed.

9. When In Doubt, Use Nukes

9 â€" WHEN IN DOUBT, USE NUKES

The day progressed slowly and uneventfully as the Cucumber moved through SlipSpace. Most of Green Team explored what little there was to explore of the ship and then went back to their quarters. Indeed, there wasn't much on the ship. Several crew decks, a mass hall, the rather cramped engine room and engineering sector at the back of the ship, the aircraft bay the Greens had arrived into, and finally a very small basketball court. With very little else to do during the trip except maybe lie in bed and read, two of the Greens decided to make use of the court.

Kevin was shooting hoops by himself, at first. Everyone on the actual crew of the Cucumber was always busy, so the court saw very little activity at 3 in the afternoon. He discovered that the time went by surprisingly quickly when he occupied himself with his ball and his thoughts about recent life developments. But pretty soon he heard footsteps, and looked at the door to find Skope traipsing in wearing a bored slouch.

The sniper looked around and quickly noticed Kevin. "Oh hi."

"Hi," said Kevin. He made another shot at the hoop. The ball sailed through the air and landed neatly into the steel circle at the opposite end of the room. It then sank through the netting and made for the floor—but not before Skope's gauntlets closed around it. Kevin shrugged in surprise as the sniper began dribbling with the ball, taking it out to the minimum distance from the hoop.

"I'm restless," Skope explained.

Kevin moved to intercept. Skope slinked away while continuing to dribble the ball. Kevin persisted. The two of them went into a circle, before Kevin was finally able to slide his hand underneath Skope's and steal the ball. He then raced away from the sniper.

Skope instantly raced over to Kevin and began to circle around him like a shark, waiting for the opportunity to take the ball back. "What was it like, being the commander of the defense force at Centerpoint City?" Skope asked.

"It was kinda awesome," Kevin replied while keeping his visor glued on Skope's position at all times. "But it also scared the crap out of me. Holding the lives of so many people in my hands—"

"I think I understand," said Skope.

"Stage fright," said Kevin. "Huge part in some play. Large audience. Everyone watching you. And if you mess up, people die. Lots of people. _That's_ what it was like for me at Centerpoint City." Skope made a lunge for the ball, but Kevin pulled back at the last instant, and Skope missed. "I've never been much of a people person," Kevin continued. "And large crowds have always unnerved me. But being commander was _ridiculous!_" He finally saw the opportunity for a shot and took it. The ball went clear across the room and through the basket.

"Good shot!" Skope shouted.

"Me one, you zero," said Kevin proudly. "What's with the question about Centerpoint City, though? I thought we were all trying to forget that shit."

"I am," said Skope. "But I also can't put it out of my mind." He and Kevin made a collective dash for the ball.

This time it was Skope who got to it first. And so, it was Kevin who took up the position of opportunistic shark. "So what all happened to you during the battle then?" Kevin asked.

"Well, there was the invasion and everything—" Skope started. "And then there was Vincent."

"Yes, the fusion coil and his Hand," said Kevin. "I think we all pretty well understand what happened with that. The electromagnetic pulse happened, the Hand crashed, and then we all had our awesome confrontation with it."

"But then came Amnion."

Both of them paused at the name. "He nearly killed all of us and destroyed the city while sitting in a floating lawn chair throne and eating popcorn," Kevin continued.

Skope nodded. "And Vincent actually saved all of us. And he saved the city. And I just can't really believe it happened. I had been obsessing over stopping him ever since the invasion of Yellow Command."

"I think you still are obsessing, dude," Kevin interrupted.

"And after everything, he sacrificed himself," said Skope.

Kevin suddenly realized the meaning of what Skope was saying. "Yes that's all very true"

That was when Skope made his shot, while Kevin was slightly distracted. The ball moved towards the hoop then bounced off of the rim. Skope released an exasperated sigh and then both of them ran for it. Skope beat Kevin to the ball by a hair, then dribbled it away. Kevin made one lunge, then another. Skope dodge both times while keeping the ball in his possession. Then he saw an opening in Kevin's defense, and shot again. This time the ball fell cleanly through the hoop without even touching the net. Skope gave a fist pump to the air. "Yes, now we're both tied!"

"Not for long!" Kevin shouted as he dashed for the ball. Skope was so distracted with is celebration that he had no time to catch up to his opponent, and within the next second Kevin was dribbling the ball away from him. Skope approached Kevin and prepared to make a lunge.

FWOOM

The entire room shuddered violently, and both Skope and Kevin suddenly had a tingling sensation all over their bodies. Then the lights dimmed, flickering for a moment before returning to their original intensity. Both Greens looked around in surprise. "What was that?" Kevin stammered.

"I think we just dropped out of slipspace," said Skope. "But why? We can't be halfway to Azure yet. And there should have been some warning, that's standard procedure" With even less warning, the lights suddenly turned a red color and started to flash. At the same instant, alarm klaxons started blaring.

"I think something's gone wrong," Kevin blurted out.

"You don't say," said Skope. The two of them raced out of the room and into the hallway. Crew members of the ship were running in both directions along the hallway, to their specified posts. Skope was about to ask one of them what was going on when the speaker system answered it for him.

"We have unexpectedly returned to real space," barked Captain Gage. "Everyone to battle stations, now! And Green Team, get up to the bridge ASAP."

Skope and Kevin looked at each other in surprise and horror, then did

as they were told and made a collective mad dash for the bridge. They rendezvoused with Jess in the nearest elevator. "Hey guys!" Jess exclaimed. "What the heck is happening?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," said Kevin.

Jess was fiddling with her iPod. "I was right in the middle of a song. These things always choose to happen at the most inopportune times."

The elevator hummed as it took them to the top level of the ship. As soon as the doors opened, they rushed out and nearly collided with the rest of Green Team, who had just arrived out of the elevators from the other sectors of the ship. "My comrades," Nome greeted hastily. "A situation would appear to be developing, and for the worse."

The group walked together towards the door to the bridge. Just as they were about to enter, the ship shook again, and everyone was flung towards one side of the hallway. "We're accelerating!" Jess shouted.

"In normal space?" Kenny asked loudly. "I don't like the sound of this." Everyone waited a few seconds for the ship to reach a constant velocity, at which point the force pinning them to the wall ceased and they all collapsed onto the floor. Then they picked themselves up and barged through the door and into the bridge. Every single console had a soldier at its helm. A holographic screen sat in the front center of the room, showing the blackness of space, as well as a large Orange object that was instantly recognizable as an Orange Frigate. The Frigate was spewing out fire towards the screen, and it was now apparent to the Greens why the Cucumber had accelerated. Captain Gage was in his chair, and Lieutenant Clara Goodwater was standing next to him. The Lieutenant was facing the direction of the door as the Greens entered, and she informed the Captain: "Sir, they're here!"

Gage briefly turned his command chair around. "Ah, you've finally arrived. You have some explaining to do. But other matters come first." He turned his chair back towards the holoscreen.

"Explaining?" Kevin asked. "What for?"

"We were pulled out of Slipspace by this enemy ship," the Captain explained with slight anger in his tone. "They knew exactly where we were in Slipspace, which means that they know about our mission. Perhaps I should remind you that this mission is heavily classified, Commander Guinness."

"Wait, hold on," said Kenny. "What are you implying, dude?"

Gage winced at the word "dude" which was not normally how captains of starships expected to be addressed. Then he stated: "Did any of you tell anyone about this mission?"

All of the Greens shook their heads.

"Well one of more of you must have made a mistake somewhere," the Captain hissed. "Because somehow, the Oranges had caught onto us and

pulled us back into normal space, and they mean business!"

"We don't know anything, we swear!" Jess insisted.

The Captain sighed. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter now. We're under attack, and at the moment that's what matters." He refocused on the holoscreen. "How close are they to getting a firing solution?" he shouted out.

One of the solders at a nearby console answered: "The enemy ship's targeting computers are scanning us all over. It won't be more than another minute."

The Captain nodded in response. "Right then." To the Greens he said "You might want to hold onto something." And then to the rest of the crew he shouted: "EVASIVE MANUVERS!"

At once, the ship careened to one side. The Greens all just barely had a chance to take hold of something before they began accelerating across the deck, first to one side, and then the other. "Fuck, more of this?" Kenny shouted. "Is there no better way to throw the enemy off, Captain?"

"Do you want to live or not?" the Captain shot back.

"We have not yet thrown off their computers, sir!" a console controller shouted to the Captain.

Gage grunted. "All right then, launch the fake nuke. That should mess up that Orange ship's plans a bit." There was a vibration from one side of the ship, and suddenly the Greens could see on the holoscreen a missile shape make its way toward the Orange frigate.

"You have a fake nuclear missile?" Nome asked. "That is unusual for possession on a Corvette class ship."

"She's not just any ship," the Captain retorted. "The Cucumber is special. Very Green and very proud. She was made for special missions like this, and special missions require special tools."

On the holoscreen, the fake nuclear missile managed to avoid interception. The frigate, terrified of what it thought was a nuclear weapon, had begun to steeply turn and change its course, consequently stopping its lock on the Cucumber, which was exactly what Gage intended to happen. Yet despite the frigate's efforts, the missile managed to collide with its hull and immediately bounced off, spiraling back into space.

"Rubber missiles for the win," said Gage smugly.

Yet things were not over yet. Recovering from Gage's trick, the frigate reared back into action, changing its course to pursue the Cucumber with a vengeance. Skope shrugged. "Well Captain, that trick was nice for about five seconds but what now? All we've done is just get the Orange ship pissed off at us."

Gage shrugged nonchalantly. "It is frequent in conflicts such as this for other ships to assume that small ships are helpless and non-threatening because of their size. Well, it's time to shove that misconception straight up this frigate's ass." With no idea what he

was talking about, the Greens just stared at Gage. Gage smiled under his helmet and elaborated: "So now, it's time to fire a real nuclear missile."

Several of the Greens chocked slightly. Nome exclaimed: "You have an actual nuclear missile, in addition to decoy ones? How does a Corvette come by these?"

"Like I said," Gage responded with no decrease in smugness. "Special missions require special tools—and this ship was built for the purpose of carrying out special missions, at the order of the Grand General—or Acting Grand General, in your case. The overarching goal of this ship is to carry out all of its missions, without fail, and no matter the cost. Often, that means nukes." He turned back to the row of consoles at the perimeter of the room. "Navigator, fire the missile!" One of the console controllers gave a proud salute and pressed a large red button. Then the ship vibrated slightly again, and another missile was away.

The frigate took no heed. It had just been through a very nasty trick with one fake missile, and was determined not to be fooled again. This was its last mistake. The frigate actually accelerated even more towards the Cucumber, so certain was it that the coming missile would be another trick. Almost as if to taunt the Cucumber, the frigate nosed itself directly at the missile, making a nonverbal statement of "It will not work twice. See how much smarter we are than you!"

The explosion was wondrous. The thermonuclear superdetonation created a brilliant white flash which vaporized the front half of the frigate. The back half slowly rotated in space for a few moments before its reactors within its engine core gave way, and then the entire ship was gone. Small metallic pieces, glowing red or white, flew throughout space, radiating from the point of detonation. Some of them collided with the Cucumber's shields and bounced off. The corvette also shuddered slightly as the dispersing ion cloud from the nuke reached it, but the Cucumber had been far enough away from the blast that its shields were again enough to absorb all damage.

Captain Gage sat back in his command chair. "Ah—that was quite fun—"

Skope had his arms crossed in thought. "I have just witnessed a corvette nuke a frigate into oblivion. I never imagined I would see something like this."

Gage laughed. "Nukes are so well known in the mainstream for being commodities of large ships. But we can't let cruisers and capitol ships have all the fun, eh?"

"Um, no, I guess not—" said Kevin.

Gage cleared his throat. "Well, now that this intermission has concluded, I think it's about time for us to resume our mission. Helmsman, take us back into Slipospace." One of the soldiers at a console saluted, and soon the blackness of real space outside had been replaced by the strangeness of Slipospace. Azure would not be far off now—

* * *

><p>It was through a sphere of brilliant and shifting light that the Empress of the Orange Army, Selina Owara, watched a small sausage shaped Green frigate jump out of the perceivable plane of the universe. In its wake lay the barely existent remnants of the frigate she had sent to apprehend the Greens and intercept their mission. With as few forces as the Orange Army had to work with, the loss of even that frigate was much more than it should have been, and the Empress knew she would not have another chance to stop the Cucumber before it reached Azure. Yet in the long run, it was of little matter. This failure simply meant that she would, indeed, have to infiltrate the war council and use the energy core of the quantum manipulator to her advantage.

Though of course, there had been another reason for her wanting to stop that Green Corvette. The energy core had shown her many things. She could look upon any location in the galaxy she wanted, without the occupants of that space having any idea they were being watched. She had used this to confirm the rumors of her informants, that indeed there was going to be a war council which would concern the plans of three Armies. It was also the reason why she had ordered one of her frigates to try to stop the _Cucumber_ just now. Because there was someone on that Corvette, someone who was having her same dreams. And again she remembered the lock of black chrome and its hexagonal symbol, with a glowing orange section at its 2:00 position.

10. Death Agent

10 " DEATH AGENT

Lemon Squadron hurried as fast as they could on a fleet of Mongooses. But as hurried as they were, it took them nearly four hours to reach their destination. The Yellow base supposedly under attack had inconveniently placed itself in the center of a nearly impassable forest of small mountains. Time and time again, the path they were on became too steep for them to drive on, and they had to find another one. And none of the maps they could pull up on their HUDs were of any use: it seemed that even the mapmakers hated the area, because none of the satellite feeds could make any sense of it either. Nor could they call in the Falcon from the Yellow Base in the canyon, because they were far enough away that the VTOL would take way too long to reach them (as slowly as they were making progress, they were still technically on a clock). Long shadows were beginning to grow upon the ground by the time Lemon finally spotted clouds of smoke rising into the air off in the distance.

"At last!" Hearts exclaimed. "I can't believe this place is so hard to find. How did the Reds find it? Well, I just hope there's still something left to defend at this point."

"Stay sharp, everyone!" Hester advised.

The group pulled out their weapons, got off their vehicles, and cautiously made their way towards the towers of smoke on foot. Nestled within the labyrinth of small mountains was a valley, and this was where the base was located. It comprised a series of very short structures connected by low sky bridges, forming a network of connections that looked somewhat like a very large circuit board.

Many of the buildings were in a destroyed state, with metal and stone pieces everywhere. Some were even still on fire, which was the source of the smoke towers. Though it was only 1600 hours in the afternoon, the base was already cast into darkness, because the sun had sunk behind the tips of the mountains on the base's western side. The base in an eerie pall, because the blue-reddish light from the sky made the buildings glow with strange luminescence. But no friendlies nor enemies could be seen.

Wren opened her tacpad. "This is Lemon Squadron, calling to any Yellow soldier still alive in the base. We have come to reinforce you. Repeat, we are here to help. If anyone on our side is still alive, please respond." She waited for two full minutes, but no response came.

"It doesn't look like there are any survivors left," said Tom. "We're too late."

Hester pounded her fist on a rock. "Damn it!"

"I'm not seeing any enemies either," said Hearts as he peeked through the scope of his rifle. "Just lots and lots of bodiesâ€|from both armies."

"I think we should still explore the base," said Tom. "There might be freindlies still trapped here who are unable to communicate for whatever reason. Not to mention that we've come all this way, might as well do something while we're here."

"Might be some enemies left over too," said Patton as he massaged his shotgun. "Lucy is hungry."

"Alright," said Hester. "But let's try to make it quick. There's something wrong about this placeâ€|I can just feel it. Everyone should be on their guard."

The group headed down from the mountain slope and walked cautiously into the base. The fires had begun to die out, and now all that was left was a terrible silence. The sky continued to cast the metal walls of the structures in a pallid glow. Searching primarily for survivors, they first headed to the barracks. Along the way, the streets were just filled with bodies, and the dirt underneath had turned a darker shade of brown from all the blood. Watching their step, Lemon walked up to the door of the barracks and pried it open. An unsettlingly complete blackness greeted them. Wren tried the lights, but the building was out of power. Everyone activated the night vision in their HUDs so that they could see.

"We need to get the power back on," said Hester.

"I'll get it done," said Hearts. "Anyone have any idea where the engineering building is?"

"I think I saw it down that way," Wren pointed.

"Thanks," said Hearts. He turned and jogged off. Wren had been almost right: the engineering building turned out to be at a corner of the base, a bit north of where she had pointed. Hearts sprinted into it, eager to get the lights back on as soon as possible. There were quite a few bodies inside. The entrance hall held six at a quick count. He

didn't want to know just what kind of slaughter had gone on here: it seemed to have been very brutal for the Yellows, since nearly all of the corpses he had seen were Yellow. It was as if the reds had just trounced over the base without a care, ruining everything in their wake.

After traversing few more hallways, Hearts finally found the generator room. A series of giant metal cylinders stared back at him. He hoped that all he had to do was just hit a few buttons. With any luck, he wouldn't have to radio Wren to come in and help him. He checked his COM for just in case. To his dismay, he discovered that something was interfering with long-range communications: his tacpad couldn't tell him what it was, but it permeated the entire base and was making it so that he could only use COMs to contact the others when he was standing very close to them. He had better do this job right then, he decided, since it would be a complicated effort to call for help. He approached the control panel, on the wall near the door. A big green button on it looked like the right thing to hit. He punched it. A loud whirring sound started up behind him, and in the next moment he was showered in light from the overheads. "Yes," he said to himself. Then he went back into the hallways to leave and find the rest of his team. He jogged back to the entry hallway and stopped dead.

The bodies in the hallway had all disappeared. The blood stains on the floor remained, but not their sources. Hearts froze where he stood. _Whatâ€¦theâ€¦fuckâ€¦_ Then he considered the possibility that maybe those bodies hadn't actually been dead. Maybe, somehow, they had just been wounded, and even now were seeking help. But then he had to dismiss that thought, because he had briefly scanned the bodies with his HUD when he had first gone through the hallway. All of the bodies would have emitted a signal, but they had not. So what then? Had Hearts somehow imagined all of those bodies being there? The sniper shook his helmet, trying to come up with an explanation but not succeeding. He had to leave the building now, his team was probably waiting on him.

But then a crashing sound came from one of the rooms off to the left of the hallway.

Hearts froze again. Maybe someone really was alive! Maybe they were in that room, trying to get help! Hearts busted down the door with a solid kick. The metal slab fell to the floor grating with a crash, causing dust to fill the air. The place looked to be a small medical room. Several metal tables on wheels held various solutions, along with tools like syringes and band-aids. Also, medical kits lay all along the walls, and a chest of medication chemicals sat in a corner. And standing in the center of the room was a Yellow soldier with their armor covered in blood.

Hearts quickly lowered his rifle and slowly approached the soldier. The soldier was simply staring off to the side of the room for some reason. "Hello?" Hearts called out. The soldier didn't move. Hearts called out again. Slowly, the soldier turned their helmet. Hearts gasped in surprise and disgust as he glimpsed the sight of the soldier's visor: it was almost entirely coated in blood, and he could see a very large bullet hole in the center of the visor, a hole through which he could see the back wall of the room. Hearts had his rifle aimed back up in the next heartbeat. "Ohmygod, _whatthefuck?_" He didn't believe what his eyes were telling him. But at the same

time, he initiated another scan with his HUD.

The soldier had NO life signs.

Hearts began to back up slowly. _This is impossible. This can't be happening. It's a zombie, a fucking zombie!_ At the same time, the dead soldier began to regard Hearts with a bit more interest. It turned to fully face the sniper, then took a very stiff, somewhat robotic, step in Hearts' direction. "Stay the hell away from me," Hearts threatened. The dead soldier took another step. Hearts instinctively opened fire with his battle rifle. The shots went straight into the dead soldier's visor, causing the walking horror to stumble back slightly.

But then it kept coming.

The zombie seemed to enjoy a rather leisurely walking pace. It took about one step per second, each time making a very stiff outreach with one of its legs. Hearts kept firing, this time aiming for the zombie's midsection. But this did even less to stop the dead soldier. The soldier seemed to be behaving more like a robot of some kind than a zombie, because all of its movements were jerky and clumsy but extremely stiff. The soldier raised a hand with a pistol in it. The aiming motion was very slow, as though the soldier had never picked up a gun before. Then it fired, and the shots hit the wall behind Hearts, all completely missing him. The soldier tried to do better, but its aiming was so terrible that it could not land a single shot with Hearts constantly moving from one side of the wall to the other and ducking. Watching the dead soldier's behavior gave Hearts an idea.

Hearts quickly strafed around the soldier, taking slight pains to avoid its phenomenally bad aim, and within seconds was able to get a glimpse of the zombie's back. Light bulbs clicked on in Hearts' brain. Held on the back of the dead soldier's helmet was a virillium data chip. They were often used for the transport of extremely large amounts of digital data, in particular artificial intelligences. And the virillium data chip on the dead soldier's back was socketed into a data feed which connected directly into its armor. Yellow armor was designed so that it was impossible for an AI to have motor influence, but only when the armor was rated ACTIVE. And ACTIVE meant the armor had to have life signs inside of it. But when there were no life signs, all bets were off, and Hearts was willing to guess that an AI was the source of the armor's activity. There was some kind of AI inside the data chip, and it was controlling the soldier's armor, in much the same way that a computer might manage a fork lift. This explained both the dead soldier's terrible aim and its jerky yet stiff motor functions. The body inside the armor had nothing to do with what was going on: the enemy was really some kind of AI which was driving the suit of armor like a vehicle.

Hearts took care of the situation by blowing the crap out of the exposed part of the data chip with his battle rifle while the soldier was still turning back around. The chip exploded with the first burst, and instantly the soldier froze and tensed madly, as though it was being electrocuted. And then it fell like a ragdoll to the ground, unmoving. Hearts continued to shoot the data chip until it was virtually unrecognizable: completely FUBAR. Once the current clip had been expended, Hearts finally straightened up, his pulse returning back to normal once again. It was time to get back to the

rest of his team. He had to tell them what had just happened and also warn them, because this soldier was only one of the bodies Hearts had seen in the hallway. There were still several others, not to mention the hundreds outside.

Hearts ran back through the remaining hallways and burst outside. An army of more AIs in armor were waiting to greet him. All of the bodies that had been just lying on the ground when Lemon had first arrived had now stood back up. And as Hearts was the only living person still outside, all of the enemies turned to face him. "Of, fuck me," said Hearts. He was very fortunate that the AIs had terrible aim, because the air was quickly filled with flying bullets which went in all directions. A few came in contact with Heart's energy shield, but none of the hits did enough damage to get through it, so he was safe. He ran faster than he had ever run before, legging it straight for the barracks he had last seen the rest of his team in. He made it there in the next moment.

The door was closed and sealed shut. The rest of Lemon must have encountered the AIs and sealed themselves inside for protection, Hearts reasoned. With the enemies still in awkward pursuit, the sniper sprinted into an alleyway. He spotted a rather large metal panel lying discarded on the ground and heaved it into place to block the alleyway's entrance. A thunderstorm of pounding rang from the panel just a few seconds after it had been set up, but it stayed in place because the AIs were apparently not smart enough to know how to move something out of the way with their arms. Hearts left the reanimated suits of armor to shoot futilely at the panel while he continued down the alleyway.

The narrow passage ended rather soon, and Hearts emerged into another street. He heard some sounds, and looked upwards to a nearby sky bridge, which connected the barracks to some other structure. And there he saw Patton, having lots of fun with his shotgun. Patton was facing down a row of AIs, which had pursued him from the barracks. And he was in the middle of a battle cry at the top of his lungs while swiftly taking down the suits of armor with Lucy. As each AI lunged for him, Patton fired off Lucy point blank into the armor's visor, taking out everything on the helmet, including the virillium data chip, in the process. "Yeaaaah!" Patton roared. "BEHOLD THE WRATH OF LUCY! AHAHAHA!" This Hearts heard over the very loud series of bangs which accompanied Patton's outburst. A pile of suits of armor was quickly piling up around Patton. Hearts just watched as Patton and Lucy did their work.

After maybe two minutes longer, the stream of AIs finally ran out. This was when Hearts opened his COM and yelled "Pinkie!" as loud as he could, while at the same time waving so that Patton would see where he was.

Patton, winding down from his energy state during the battle, turned and noticed Hearts. "Hearts! There you are! Look, this whole place is a trap! The suits of armor lying around everywhere, with dead soldiers, have had virillium chips put in them with an AI that reanimates the armor. The Hollows have been after us since you left for the generator!"

"Yes, I know! I just escaped from a swarm of them," said Hearts. "Waitâ€¦Hollows?"

"That's what we're calling these things," said Patton. "It's Wren's idea. Because, see, the armor isn't being controlled by its occupant. So it's technically 'hollow', hence the name."

Hearts nodded. "I see, clever. So then, what's the quickest way for me to get to you? And where is everyone else?"

Patton sighed. "We got fucking separated when the first wave of Hollows attacked." He pointed at the building on the opposite end of the sky bridge from the barracks. "Last I heard, they're in there. You should find a way in from ground level, then we can meet up when we're both inside."

Hearts nodded. "Good idea." He ran off, searching for an entrance to the building from the street. Though the sun still had yet to depart the sky entirely, a thick darkness had begun to set over the base, and the pallid glow emanating from all the buildings had hardly lessened at all. The base seemed to be becoming even more ominous as time passed. Searching the unnaturally lit streets, Hearts scoured the perimeter of the building the rest of his team had gone into. He soon came across an entryway on the structure's northern side: a Plexiglas double door. To open on its own, the door needed a keycard that Hearts didn't have. So he fired a sniper round into the control panel. The door admitted him entrance.

The building had a low ceiling but wide hallways. The light fixtures painted the hallways in a sharply bright glow: the voltage to their circuits had probably been offset slightly during the attack on the base, and now the light was almost painful to look at, being was reminiscent of the lights a crazed dentist's office might use. Hearts took the stairs to the second floor, neglecting the elevator in lieu of the power problems the base had proved to contain. He came upon a Hollow standing awkwardly on the second floor landing. Now knowing what these things were and how to deal with them, Hearts picked off the reanimated armor's virillium chip from afar with this battle rifle. That took care of that problem. Then he headed up to the third floor, which was the level Patton's sky bridge had been on and where he hoped they could reunite.

Hearts tuned to the door with a giant number 3 on it and kicked it in. More annoyingly bright ceiling lights glowed over a landscape of small cubicles with data terminals. This was the data processing level, then. Hearts held out his battle rifle in front of him and pressed forward. The normal order of the data processing level and its cubicles had been shattered by the attack: many of the small walls had been shifted dramatically, turning the place into a complicated labyrinth. Several times, Hearts became turned around and had to find his way again. And he couldn't just shoot his way through the walls, because they were made of metal, and also because he just didn't have enough ammo. After wandering around for a few minutes, he suddenly heard the sounds of gunfire in the distance. He could definitely make out Patton's shotgun, but it was mixed in with other weapons, which could only mean that the rest of the team was at that spot as well. Hearts began to walk much more quickly, wanting to catch the rest of the team before they moved on. He tried using his COM, but yet again it would only work for short range, because something was blocking distant frequencies.

With nothing better to do, Hearts began to sprint. To aid this effort he temporarily disabled the motor function safety limiters in his

armor, which allowed him to move more freely and agilely. He wouldn't normally have done something like this, since it was a common accident to sprain a tendon by misusing the power of the armor. But Hearts needed to reach his team, and he needed to do it now. He meandered through the maze of cubicles, trying to stay in as straight a path as possible and in the proper direction. Luck was with him, for he could hear the sounds of gunfire slowly growing louder. Then he began to run into more Hollows. He chip-shotted them on the side of the helmet and moved on without hesitation. As he moved forward, the Hollows gradually increased in intensity. Finally, he barged into a clearing in the cubicles, where many of the metal walls had tipped over. The rest of Lemon Squadron, including Patton, had taken cover behind a set of upended walls lined in a row, and were firing over them at a massive horde of Hollows emerging from the other side of the room.

Hearts hastily joined his teammates behind the row of metal walls. "Ah, there you are!" said Hester with mild relief.

Hearts shook his helmet. "I walk off to do something for five minutes, and this entire place gets overrun by zombies. What is this universe coming to?"

"Hollows," said Inez sternly. "Not zombies."

"Yeah, that's right," said Hearts. "Armor puppets being controlled by AIs. But frankly, I don't see much a difference, because when it comes down to it we're fighting possessed dead guys, and if that isn't what zombies are, then I don't know what is."

"That's a good point," said Deryn with her head poked up, as she fired off her DMR and took out several Hollows with a single clip.

"Hey guys!" Wren suddenly exclaimed while typing furiously on her tacpad. "I've been working isolating that signal which is telling all of the Hollows what to do. The Hollows aren't smart enough to coordinate an assault like this by themselves, which means that someone or something has to be controlling them externally. And I think I've just about isolated the vector it has to be coming from. Because it turns out that the thing interfering with our long-range communications is itself a signal, and if I can just back trace it to its source thenâ€¦aha! I've got, clear as day!"

"Tell us all, sis!" said Hester.

"It's coming from the roof of this building," said Wren. "And the structure of the signal looks like something that might originate from a tactical pad, like the one I'm using right now. I think an enemy soldierâ€"a living oneâ€"is coordinating all of the Hollows."

"We need to get to him," said Hearts. "So that we can all kick him in the balls for being such a douche."

"Then we need to get past all these Hollows somehow," Deryn muttered.

"I think I might be able to handle that," said Tom. He stood up out of cover and pulled off from his belt the largest looking grenade

anyone else in Lemon had ever seen (it was the size of maybe a grapefruit, and at first sight looked more like a straightforward bomb). Tom rolled the throw until he had enough momentum, then muttered softly "fire in the hole" and let his baby loose.

The giant grenade sailed towards the center of the oncoming group of Hollows. Tom didn't see the rest, because he had gotten back into cover by then. But the great earthquake which sent flooring and tiles everywhere said the rest. The members of Lemon waited until stuff had stopped crashing down above them, then slowly and cautiously eased their helmets out to look at the scene. The room was noticeably more of a mess than it had been before. And the giant group of Hollows had been utterly annihilated, for a gaping hole in the floor now existed where they had all been standing.

Tom shrugged. "Eh, I think that took care of it."

"Let's go!" said Hester. "We need to get to the guy on the roof so we can stop the madness with the Hollows." The group eased around the giant hole in the floor, made it slowly to the door to the stairwell, and then began to race up the stairs as high as they would go. More hollows were waiting on the stairs, of course, but this group was nowhere near as large as the one they had encountered on the data processing level, and was also forced into a tight line by the width of the stairwell. This allowed Lemon to easily pick all of them off. Patton and his shotgun led the charge. The Hollows fell like dominoes, and within only a few short moments Lemon emerged onto the rooftop.

The roof was mostly bare and covered with a thin layer of gravel, save for a few ventilation shafts pointing towards the dark sky. The sun had entirely gone behind the mountains by this point, and from the top of the building, Lemon could see that the entire base had fallen into darkness. Its pallid glow had gone, and now the only light from down below were the sparse electronic lights from the building lights down below. Lemon looked around the area of the rooftop, searching for their target. Because the rooftop offered no cover except for the few short ventilation shafts, there was virtually nowhere for the target to hide. The group scoured the flat region, until finally Tom just barely managed to spot him. "There, everyone. I see him."

The figure was standing on the very corner of the rooftop, clad in red armor with a jet black secondary color. His legs set closely together, and his arms were clasped around his chest in an odd embrace. His posture was entirely rigid, like a broad stick. His stature looked like a cross between a curled up bat and a mummy in a coffin. Upon being sighted, the figure's visor turned slowly upward, to look directly at Lemon. They all stood aghast at what they saw in the figure's gaze: a cruel human skull grinned out at everyone. At first Lemon thought they might actually be staring at a real zombie. But then they looked more closely, and realized that the image was actually a three dimensional hologram superimposed onto the plane of the figure's visor. It was instantly recognizable as the same visor worn by the two Reds who had taken Amber and Clair captive during Lime Squadron's most recent expedition into the alternate universe. This figure was clearly another member of that same division of the Red Army.

The figure spoke: "You have come." His tone was filled with a cold,

compassionless focus that was mixed with malice. Suddenly, Lemon heard movement around them. They looked to the door to the stairs, and saw to their surprise and dismay that it was covered in a layer of Hollows, whom were coating the entrance structure with their own bodies. At the same moment, dozens of Hollows emerged from over the side, having climbed the walls of the building from the street. All of them had no doubt been summoned by the Red figure. The figure stepped off of the corner ledge and approached Lemon very slowly. As he did so, he extended his arms from his chest and held them out as if in greeting. "I have been waiting for this moment. I have been chosen, you see, chosen by Lord Amnion himself to meet you here. After I had my minions destroy this base, I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but then, just as Amnion said you wouldâ€¦_you came_. So now, as his loyal Death Agent, I can finally complete my mission and make all of you his servants."

"Fat chance of that, buddy," said Hester, her weapon extended towards the figure, whom had just addressed himself as a "Death Agent" which was probably the name of his specialized division.

As though he were starving and had just ordered an ice cream sundae, the Death Agent shouted to his Hollows: "Kill them!" The lust for violence in his tone carried over to the AIs as a command, and the Hollows instantly began to advance on Lemon from all sides. The fight started up again, and everyone in Lemon opened fire with their weapons. While the others were focused on taking out the Hollows, the Death Agent suddenly approached Wren with an alarming and almost inhuman quickness. The Death Agent reached out to her with an uppercut, but Wren dodged. And then suddenly, she felt his arms around her throat and a sharp metallic instrument behind her neck. His strength was insanely powerful. "I can feel your heartbeat," the Death Agent breather into her helmet's sound receivers. "I think I shall end it now. You will make a wonderful minion, oh yes!" With as much strength as she could muster, Wren instantly punched the Death Agent in the side with her elbow and then heaved her torso forwards, throwing all of her momentum in front of her. The Death Agent was forced to let go or topple over. He let go just as Wren ducked from her lunge, and a ruler-sized razor blade whizzed through the air right above her head, which would have decapitated her had she reacted a split second later. Wren dove into a summersault to put distance between her and the Red. But the Death Agent was much too quick: no sooner had Wren gotten to her feet when the Red was standing in front of her. Again the razor screamed towards her. This time, Wren blocked it with the steel buffer plate on her left forearm. Again and again the razor came towards her. She was able to block the hit each time, but only just barely, for the Death Agent's reflexes were crazily fast.

"Hey you!" a voice suddenly shouted. Hearts came up from behind the Death Agent, lunging forwards with his own pair of knives. But the Red was ready, for he instantly took hold of both Hearts' wrists, flipped the poor Yellow onto his shoulder, and then heaved him across the rooftop. Hearts went sailing through the air and landed near the opposite edge, missing the roof's perimeter by only a meter.

"Hearts!" Wren shouted.

"I'm okay!" he yelled back. He stumbled to his feet in a somewhat dazed manner. "How the hell is he that strong?"

The Death Agent turned back to Wren, giant razor in gauntlet. "Power is the prize of those who serve Amnion!" He lunged at her. But he was interrupted by Hester, who took hold of the Death Agent's wrist before he knew what was going on and at the same time swept out with her foot, knocking the Red off balance.

"Leave my sister alone!" she yelled at him. Then she shoved him into a group of Hollows. The Death Agent was very massive, for he did not push easily. But he went over nonetheless. With his shotgun, Patton was just cleaning up the last of the Hollows that had climbed into the roof. When he saw the Red sail into a pile he was about to destroy, he modified his priorities slightly and moved towards the Death Agent.

The Red was back on his feet in a flash. "Know when Death has come for you, Yellow," he sneered at Patton.

"Likewise," said Patton nonchalantly as he fired Lucy into the Red's chest plate.

The chest plate was filled with layers of electronics, which sparked and sizzled when the shot went off. Stunned, the Death Agent stumbled backwards in a daze. At the same time, all of the remaining Hollows suddenly stopped, seized violently, and then fell lifeless to the ground. Whatever apparatus had been used to control the Hollows had clearly been in the Death Agent's chestplate, and now that it was finished, so were the Hollows. "Myâ€|minionsâ€|" the Death Agent exclaimed sadly as he continued to awkwardly backpedal. He reached the perimeter of the rooftop without realizing it, then accidentally stepped off of it and fell backwards out of sight. A slimy thud sounded a second later. Lemon Squadron rushed to the ledge and looked down. The Death Agent had been impaled by a street lamp. The concrete beneath him was quickly turning the same color as his armor's primary hue.

"Ygh," said Hearts. "What a way to go."

"Close fight though," said Hester. "Much too closeâ€|"

"How will we report any of this?" Inez asked.

Hester crossed her arms on thought. "What I think we should say isâ€|the Red Army now has a supersoldier division. Which is capable of reanimating the armor of deceased soldiers."

"Sums it up good enough for me," said Patton. "Now let's get back."

With that, Lemon Squadron climbed down from the building and then left the accursed base. After what they had just seen, it would be nice to return to the comforts of the Yellow Base in the canyon.

11. A Voice of Dissent

11 â€" A VOICE OF DISSENT

The special meeting took place at the very heart of the Capitol

Tower. The twenty-fifth and highest floor of the grand structure was more a promontory of purple-colored steel than a floor in the traditional sense. This level was actually the largest level within the tower, for its boundaries jutted out to hang over the lower walls of the tower. The circular perimeter of the level was one long circular window that wound across the perimeter of that floor. The window was a one way glass, such that from the outside it was only black, but looking out from the inside, one could admire the view of the many streets of Vinsã³th down below, and also have a slightly better view of the surface on the asteroid's opposite side. However, it was the center room of that level in which the meeting was taking place. No windows looked into this chamber, and the only one true entity was the darkness, which was permeated only by several subtle purple lights around the room, as well as the glow from several holograms in the room's center. The look of the War Room was distinctly similar to the command dome aboard the Avant Garde. The Admiral always seemed to like planning while cloaked in near darkness, a facet of him which had only ever served to exemplify his cunning. This meeting would likely exemplify it further.

Hathrow Vorennius had once again convened his Vice Admiralty, this time for a discussion of strategy. Now that the War of Six Armies had begun, it was extremely important that a specific plan be devised for the Purple Army's immediate future. The Admiral and his six Generals stood in a circle around a holographic representation of the entire galaxy. Its six main arms embraced a core of light, and every part of the three-dimensional shape had been divided into hundreds of colored regions of space, each one representing the territory a particular Army owned.

Gorn Wilhuff cleared his throat. "From my observation, the situation has become increasingly chaotic since the War's beginning. We simply cannot win a fight against all other Armies at the same time, not even with the help of the Reds. I suggest that we focus on the Greens for now. Absolute justice should come first, then dominion."

The Admiral looked briefly at Wilhuff. "You sound as though we have not been focusing on the Green Army already. Their capitol city has been attacked, and we have in captivity their leader. They are wounded."

"All the more reason to strike upon them once more!" shouted Seren Dizra, General of the Revolutionary Forces.

The Admiral shook his helmet. "Do not misunderstand me, General Dizra. I do fully intend to wipe the Green Army from the galaxy. But at the moment, there is another matter which must take our focus." He reached out and touched a part of the hologram with the tip of his finger. The hologram then zoomed in on a system which had regions from all six territorial colors clashing together at one spot: the planet XBOXL1V. "The place from which I have just returned is no less a lynchpin in the war," the Admiral explained. "I have heard rumors of a war council that is to take place here very soon. It is a planning meeting between the Greens, the Yellows and the Blues."

"The Blues?" Wilhuff asked loudly, his visor a look of surprise. "The Blues are in no alliance."

"But they soon could be," said Vorennius. "The war council will

determine whether or not they join the Green-Yellow Alliance, and if they do, it will become significantly harder for us to campaign into Green territory. The Blue Army by itself is little threat, but when used as support alongside Green and Yellow ships, our strategies for conquest will have to become much more complex."

"Do you mean to interrupt the war council?" asked Yoren Stendaar.

The Admiral shook his helmet. "I would, but I do not know where on the planet the council will take place. I think a more effective move is simply to assassinate Lord Blue. It will throw the Blue Army into chaos."

Stendaar couched quietly. "There might be another way, Admiral."

Vorennius looked at him.

Stendaar started: "Now, I am fully aware that our alliance with the Reds was not fully by choice—but we can use them."

Vorennius stared blankly at the wall for a second, deep in thought, then shook his helmet once again. "I do not think it such a good idea. There are things about the Red Army you do not know—they are using _us_."

Stendaar stared hard at Vorennius. "Using us—but what do you mean?"

The Admiral would speak no more on the subject. "The Reds have their own agenda—I think it best we do not interfere."

The rest of the Vice Admiralty all stared at the Admiral. He had never, NEVER, concerned himself with another faction's agenda. Something was going on, and the Admiral was doing his best to clue everyone else onto it.

"Admiral—" Dizra asked with concern. "Is there something we need to know about?"

Vorennius stared everyone in the visor. "Motives are the most important thing. Certain prisoners might know more about this subject." The Admiral paused, thinking what to say, and then spoke: "The Red Army has seen a loss of fusion coils recently. Their agenda is now influenced by the forces _behind_ that event. Now, may we move on?"

Stendaar nodded with hesitation. Vorennius had just told everyone something in code. "Motives are the most important thing" was code for "I am under duress". But this was odd, since the Admiral was inside the capitol building and surrounded by his Vice Admiralty. More likely what it was supposed to mean was "Someone is listening to everything I say". And if he understood the rest of the Admiral's disguised message properly, it had something to do with the fact that Vincent had recently been replaced as leader. It was unknown who the new leader was yet, but the Reds definitely had one, if the success of their latest campaigns was any indication. Clearly, the Admiral knew something vital about the Red Army's new leader. And he had hinted that the Green prisoner, Richard Face, might know something

about it. Standaard resolved to visit Face in his cell as soon as the meeting had concluded.

The discussion moved on. The artificial intelligence which was kept within the tower was giving a run-down of the overall situation regarding the War. In traditional monotone voice, the computer explained: "The state of the galaxy has changed dramatically since the War of Six Armies began. According to observations, all other Armies have been spurred on by the Battle of Centerpoint City, which has served as a catalyst event. The Green Army has rebuffed its defenses for all of its worlds. The Yellow Army, in an alliance with the Green Army, has succeeded in taking several systems from the Red Army. But the Red Army is also on the move, for it is currently ravaging Blue territories all over the galaxy. And within just the last few days, several unoccupied systems have been claimed by the Orange Army, which is gaining valuable resources in several vital systems and is likely to soon become stronger than our own fleets at Roster Teth. Since the events at Centerpoint City, all of the other Armies have launched many new campaigns. The entropy state of our own situation within the galaxy is increasing at an alarming rate. Swift action is needed."

Vorennius clinched his fists as he listened to the AI's report. This was not what he had intended, not at all. When he had first come to XBOXL1V, he had intended only to find retribution for what the Green Army had done to Roster Teth. Absolute justice. The downfall of the Green Army was supposed to have been swift and painless. But then the key battle had come—and against all of the Admiral's predictions, the city had survived. He had underestimated the power of the Green Army's alliance with the Yellows, for just as the city had been about to fall, the Yellows had sent in their own ships and managed to drive off the attack fleet. And the event itself had caused such a stir for the Greens that now everyone else had taken advantage of it, particularly the newer Armies such as the Oranges and the Reds. Vorennius himself had effectively begun the War of Six Armies without meaning to. It had been his campaign at XBOXL1V and the attack he had commanded which had served as the catalyst for galactic chaos. And now the Admiral was expected to find a way to make order out of the situation, one strategy at a time. Fortunately, he did at least know what the next step had to be.

The Admiral straightened up. "Lord Blue must be assassinated. The Blue Army cannot be allowed to join the Green-Yellow Alliance. It would make the situation that much more difficult for us."

Wilhuff nodded. "I agree. I can think of no better move at the moment. Unless of course you can convince the Reds to be more cooperative."

Veros Rane, the General of the Stretch Arm, shook his helmet. "The Reds have no intention of cooperating with us, Wilhuff. I do not understand why we are currently in an alliance with them, for so far we have given them some of our technologies, but they have given us nothing. How is this alliance to benefit us?"

Another General spoke up, Toer Vandon, General of the Lesser Arms. "An alliance with them is better than fighting on our own. They have their own agenda, as we do ours. They will eventually prove of use to us, but not perhaps at the moment. Right now, I think we should be much more concerned with the War Council and the Blue Army."

The Admiral nodded. Then he said: "Computer, do we have any spies stationed on Azure?"

"Affirmative," said the AI. "There are five agents on missions near the province of Muffinia. All of them are capable of reassignment for the assassination."

"Excellent," said the Admiral. Something was finally looking up. "Reassign all of them. Order them to rendezvous with each other and then launch the assassination as a team."

"Orders sent," said the AI.

"Things are setting into place, then," said Vorennius. "Though things are not best right now, the war will soon fall into our favor. Victory will always emerge when order is attained from chaos." He then turned to the last of the Vice Admiralty. "General SÃ³sh, I will need you to travel to Azure yourself and oversee the operation. We cannot have anything go wrong."

Cloaked in darkness in his corner, Zan SÃ³sh, General of Special Operatives, nodded. His movement could barely be perceived for the immense darkness he was cloaked in. SÃ³sh was noted for his reclusive tendencies and attention to efficiency, as well as precision, traits he enjoyed sharing with Vorennius. During the revolution of Roster Teth, SÃ³sh had been in command of all special operations, particularly those involving the elimination of specific targets. For a mission involving the assassination of the leader of one of the Big Three Armies, SÃ³sh's expertise was certainly warranted. Of course, Nezilus Thane was also skilled in assassination ops, but he was such a loyal bodyguard that Vorennius needed him to remain at his side. This left only SÃ³sh for the mission's tasks, of which SÃ³sh had no problem. "It will be done, Admiral," SÃ³sh said slowly with a voice of patient determination.

Vorennius stepped back from the console. "Well, my comrades, I believe this concludes our meetingâ€|at least for now. When I have more ideas about how to further turn the war in our favor, I will summon all of you again."

The members of the Vice Admiralty nodded and turned to leave. As Stendaar was making for the door, he glanced one final time at the Admiral. Vorennius' visor responded with a look of necessity. There was something the Admiral wanted Stendaar to discover, something that he did not feel safe admitting aloud, even to his own Vice Admiralty. The look between them lasted for only a second, but it conveyed volumes. He left the War Room and headed for one of the elevators. Judging by the subtle clues the Admiral had given him, it sounded like he needed to start by seeing Richard Face in his cell, and glean from him what he could of the Red Army's leader. It was a long shot, since the Reds had launched their attack on Centerpont City only after Face had been captured. But Stendaar didn't know where else to go, so whatever he could learn from Face would be well worth it.

* * *

><p>Once his Vice Admiralty had left the room, Vorennius reclined to his command chair in the back of the room. It was of a more leisurely design than the chair in the command dome of the Avant Garde,</p>

this one including padding along with polished steel. Once he had settled in, he verbally ordered the tower's AI: "Bring in the Communications Director. I am ready to see him now."

The door to the War Room opened, and a stoutly framed Purple with a helmet shaped like a bubble entered slowly. He came before Vorennius' command chair and knelted humbly. "Admiralâ€¦I must say, what an honor it is to meet you in person. You are the savior of our Army, and your reputation more than precedes you."

The Admiral nodded. "How very gracious of you."

"Now then," the Communications Director asked blithely. "What is the nature of this meeting?"

Agreeing that they needed to get straight to the point, the Admiral said: "We are here to discuss your status within the Army."

The Communications Director stroked the bottom of his visor in thought. "I seeâ€¦and what exactly is it concerning?"

The Admiral leaned forwards. "Well of course, the fact that you are a traitor."

The Communications Director looked up quickly, with shock. "_What?_"

The Admiral sat back into his command chair again, quite at ease. "There is no point in pretending not to know. You were careless. Your crimes against this Army are all but obvious."

A sudden panic had crept into the Communications Director's voice and disposition. "_But sirâ€¦whatever do you mean?_"

The Admiral clasped his gauntlets in solemn recollection. "Let us travel back to the day of the attack on Centerpoint City, shall we?"

The Communications Director gulped. The Admiral was getting close to something. But how could he possibly know? "Aâ€¦marvelousâ€¦victoryâ€¦" he croaked out nervously.

"It was not!" the Admiral countered sharply. "The city still stands. And it does so largely because of you."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the Communications Director pleaded.

The Admiral continued: "On the day of the attack, a Yellow command station in orbit over the city was neutralized by the Twins, so that the Yellows would not be able to call for reinforcements. The station was fired with electromagnetic pulse discharge spheres. It should not have been able to do anything. Yet a few hours into the battle, the Yellows were able to get the station up and running again. It has taken a bit of time to discover exactly how they managed this. But after examining our interceptions of transmissions from the station, we came upon a particular one, which came just before the station reactivated its communications array."

Vorennius hit a button on his chair's armrest. A two dimensional

hologram emerged from one of the room's projectors. Hanging in midair like an odd ghost, the plane was a black square with white letters inside of it. The Admiral read: "I quote: You will need my help if you are to disable the crawler droids and restart your communications. I am on your side. The frequency for disabling the droids is 242445.3 hertz. I have come to realize that what my Army is doing is wrong, and I hope that you are able to stop this attack as soon as possible." When the Admiral looked up again, he saw that the Communications Director had begun to shiver. "It is signed with your name at the bottom," the Admiral finished. "Now tell me—do you think that our Army's agenda is some kind of joke?"

"N-no—sir—" the Communications Director stammered.

"Because either you do take it as a joke, or you are a complete and utter idiot. You sent a transmission to the Yellow command station, explaining how to counteract our weapons, and then signed it with your name. You are a fool in every sense of the word."

The Communications Director suddenly stood up straight. "Am I, Admiral? Because somehow, you have reached the conclusion that genocide will bring peace to the galaxy. Just look at what you've done, at the lives your agenda has taken. You are a monster. You will lead this Army on a path of terror and death—"

"_My agenda _is_ this Army's agenda!" Vorennius said loudly. "Absolute peace can only be achieved through absolute order. And absolute order can only be achieved if freedom of will is expunged, for it is the root of all chaos. This Army will bring peace upon the galaxy. However many lives must be taken is inconsequential, for many more will be saved in the long term. You have endangered that agenda with your idiocy. Because of your actions, Centerpoint City still stands, and the plans of this Army have had to become more complicated."

The Communications Director shook his helmet violently. "NO, you're wrong, Vorennius! _You_ are the greatest danger to this Army! You are using us all to perpetuate your campaign of destruction!" As he spoke, he slowly withdrew his sidearm from his tool belt. "But I can end this madness! I can stop the meaningless killing, from our side and others, and save everyone from you. It will all end as you do!" He aimed at the Admiral's helmet.

A loud hissing sound suddenly came from behind the Communications Director. Then a blade of white light suddenly shot through his chest, and he dropped his sidearm, his body instantly convulsing as his nervous system was fried from the electric current of the White Blade. Then the blade disappeared back into his chest, as quickly as it had emerged, and the Communications Director dropped to the ground like a ragdoll. Standing behind him was Nezilus Thane.

"A bit too close, perhaps," said Vorennius.

"I will not delay that much again, Admiral," said Thane. "I did not think that someone like him would be driven enough to try to assassinate you. The galaxy has become no safer since we retook Roster Teth."

"Not at all," the Admiral agreed. "And now we are having to fear members of our own Army. I do hope that the Communications Director

was the only person with so much dissent, but I suspect that he is not. It is yet another complication, for a reactionary movement is the absolute last thing my plans need right now."

Thane retreated back into the shadows while Vorennius retreated to his inner thoughts. Though many things had gone wrong, one thing was going correctly: Stendaar had understood Vorennius' veiled message that the Red-Purple Alliance was not all that it seemed. He didn't expect that Richard Face would know much of Amnion, but what little he did know, or even figure out, would help Stendaar to realize that the leader of the Red Army, Amnion, was an extreme threat who had forced the Admiral's hand. He was not able to tell his Vice Admiralty of Amnion directly because he had been sure that Amnion was somehow listening to everything that was being said. Knowing the stories about Amnion, Vorennius was sure that the dark soldier had hidden eyes and ears everywhere around Vinsã³th, to ensure he could control affairs like a puppeteer with string. The Admiral had chosen Stendaar for the message because he was the most open-minded of the Vice Admiralty, the one most capable of seeing details between the lines. And so, it was now up to him to uncover the truth behind Amnion's release. When he eventually did, Vorennius would have a mission for him. Potentially, the fate of the Purple Army hung in the balance.

12. Lord Blue

12 " LORD BLUE

At 0730 hours Galactic Time, the crew of the _Cucumber_ was awakened with the news that the Corvette had finally reached the planet of Azure. The members of Green Team joined each other at the window of one of the hallways and stared out into space. A blue marble sat out in the cosmos. Even better than Earth was reported to be, Azure looked like a gleaming jewel in space. "It's beautiful!" Jess breathed.

Everyone funneled onto the bridge. Captain Gage, Lieutenant Goodwater, and the bridge staff were all at their stations. "Come to watch the landing sequence, have you?" Gage asked as the Greens entered.

"Sending out a landing request," said one of the officers at a console.

Another voice came through over COMs. "This is the Director of Muffinia Traffic Control. _Cucumber,_ you are not of the Blue Army. Please state your purpose immediately."

"We read you, Controller," said Gage into a transceiver on the arm of his command chair. "We have an appointment with Lord Blue. Check with the Muffinian Council to confirm."

A few seconds later, the Controller said "Roger, you are cleared to enter, Green Army Corvette _Cucumber._ Docking Port 47 is open and prepped for your vessel. Please enjoy your stay on this world."

The momentum in the room shifted slightly as the ship began to descend to Azure's surface. The Greens watched as the clouds thinned out and a cityscape was revealed. Gigantic blue towers made of glass

and painted metal, some of them kilometers tall, gleamed in bright sunlight as far as the eye could see. It was a planetary city of shimmering sapphire structures. In between districts, rivers and lakes, of water so pure that one could see all the way to the bottom like glass, glistened in the reflection of the sun. There were hardly any natural landscapes, but it didn't matter, because the city and its bodies of water captivated in their own way. The Greens were stunned in awe of the beauty. Nothing in Centerpoint City came anywhere close to this in terms of eye candy, and so far Azure (the province of Muffinia in particular) was maintaining its reputation as the extremely posh and pompously prestigious capitol world of the Blue Army. The Greens had often heard Muffinia be referred to as the Sapphire City. Now they knew why.

The Cucumber swept down through the air, towards a structure near a body of water, that was shaped like a blue hot dog, with a long tubular section that was slowly opening up lengthwise. The ship entered the opening and sat gently down. Then one of the bridge crew activated an elevator lift that would take the Greens from the hanger bay to the ground. The Greens sprinted to the hanger bay and took the lift. Once they stepped off the lift and onto the grated floor of the landing port, a host of Blue soldiers were waiting to greet them. "Come with us, Greens," said one of them in the traditional Helium dialect. "His Blueness the Lord of All Things That Are Blue wishes to see you."

The Greens looked at each other after that last sentence. Skope shrugged. "Okay. Lead on, dudes." As a large group, the Greens and Blue Escort Team walked out of the docking port and packed themselves into a large hovercraft shaped like a very large limousine. While in the air, the Greens were able to get a much more detailed tour of Muffinia. From a closer distance, they could see the many towers, multileveled streets, lakes, and public parks that the Sapphire City had to offer. The ride lasted for a good twenty minutes (the province of Muffinia was all one huge cityscape), and the Greens loved every second of it for the sights, but eventually they came upon the largest structure of them all: a gigantic tower which stretched roughly five kilometers above its base. It was a mountain of a structure, with its lowest level wide enough that it could have fit a country town inside of itself. It had several hundred levels, which decreased in area as they got higher, so that the structure was shaped like a colossal curved pyramid. Stretching their visors up to look through the skylight of the hover-limousine, the Greens could just barely make out a penthouse-like bulb at the very top of the tower, which was located in place of the tip of the spike of the pyramid's peak.

"Now that is one big fucking building," said Kenny with his mouth gaping open underneath his visor.

The hovercraft's pilot nodded. "This is the capitol building of Muffinia, and of all of Azure—and, therefore, of the Blue Army."

"Lord Blue lives in that penthouse at the top, does he not?" Nome asked.

"Have you guys been here before?" the pilot asked.

"No," said Skope. "We're all just really smart." The pilot bought

it.

The hovercraft dropped the Greens off at one of the landing pads about halfway up the height of the capitol tower. As they were already two and a half kilometers above the ground level of the city, the wind was extremely strong. The air buffeted them as they made their way through a large double door and into an interior hallway. The tower proved to be just as large on the inside as it looked on the outside, for the path the Escort Team led the Greens on took them several minutes to complete, and that was before they came to an elevator. The ride on the elevator, taking place within the tallest tower the Greens had ever seen, took several minutes. The car was large enough for a lounge, and actually had padded chairs and tables in it, where the crowds of people sat in leisure as they waited for the elevator to reach their level. The Greens of course had to wait longest, since their level was the very top of the tower.

Finally, the doors opened on Lord Blue's Penthouse, and the Greens stepped out into a fantastically decorated hallway. The walls of the high-ceilinged chamber were lined with sculptures and tapestries that all accentuated the many hues of the color blue. Being near the outside of the spherical penthouse, the hallway had blue colored glass panes, which changed the sunlight from the sky into even more blue colored light, and made all of the artwork within the hall glisten in brilliant bedazzlement.

The Escort Team led the Greens though the hallway and deeper into the penthouse. Beyond the hallway was a dome-shaped waiting room. The perimeter of the floor had a cushioned circular seat that went all the way around the room's edge. The Escort Team informed the Greens that it was still very early in Lord Blue's day (0800 Galactic Time) and that they would likely have to wait for quite awhile. And wait they did. It was not until 1000 GT, a full two hours later, that the Greens were received. But they didn't actually mind that much, because they spent most of that time admiring the artwork in the penthouse's entrance hallway and taking advantage of the awesome view, which happened to be the highest point on all of Azure and looked down upon all of the city of Muffinia. They were kept refreshed by a minibar off to the side of the waiting room, which had exquisitely prepared food dishes that the Greens greatly enjoyed.

A few minutes after the clock in the waiting room ticked 1000 hours, the doors to a chamber deeper within the penthouse opened, and a Blue soldier emerged, shouting out in a loud voice: "His Grand Blueness the Lord of All Things That Are Blue wishes to receive you now. Please enter." The Greens got up from the circular seat and moved though the newly opened doorway as a group. The chamber beyond was situated at the very center of the penthouse. It was another hallway, much larger than the entrance hallway, by length, width, and height. The floor was made of a blue colored clear plexiglass that looked down upon the interior of the tower, the hundreds of lower floors. The walls had windows of blue stained glass that looked out upon the city through elaborate designs in glassmaking. The Greens sauntered down the hallway, finally approaching its end. Sitting at either end of a series of chrome steps were two gigantic steel busts of blueberry muffins. The metal statues towered over the Greens, and appeared almost to be guards of some kind, for the Blue Army's leader. None of the Greens had ever seen sculptures of food look so threatening, yet these did so.

As the Greens came upon the steps of blue chrome, a Blue soldier standing off to the side suddenly barked out in a shrill voice, which caused many of the Greens to jolt from surprise. "Allow me to present to youâ€|His Blueness, Leader of the Blue Army, and Champion of All Things Blue, the Destined One Who Shall Cover the Galaxy in His Brilliant, Illustrious Bluenessâ€|LORD BLUE!"

The Greens looked up to the top of the stairs, which narrowed as they ascended, and centered around a throne of blue chrome which was decorated on its surface with jewels and filaments of brilliant glass. Sitting upon the throne was a Blue soldier who was wearing so much jewelry that it was not immediately apparent how he was able to move, for his armor's decorations utterly enshrouded him. Lord Blue then rose from his throne and slowly walked down towards Green Team. As he moved, he emanated a sound like the loud rustling of wind, as all the dangly jeweled things hanging off of him clacked together. "So then," he said in a very loud and high-pitched voice. "This is the infamous Green half of Lime Squadron, is it not? The ones who fought to stop Vincent the Fusion Coil from popping the universe, and then defied the Purples during their attack on Centerpoint City."

"Yup, that's us," said Kevin matter-of-factly.

"Holy shit," Kenny whispered. "We are popular!"

"Not as popular as Lord Blue!" Jess whispered back. "Basically the entire galaxy knows him. Do you have any idea how many likes he has of Facebook? Nearly a billion! Comparing that with Lime Squadron, we have only 10 million! Lord Blue has so many likesâ€|he's just so awesomeâ€|and he recognized us, can you believe it? He recognized us!" She did a tiny jump of glee. Skope sighed in disgust.

Lord Blue, still on the stairs to his throne, looked down upon Green Team like a British Lord looking down upon newly acquired peasants. "So then, you are all well acquainted with who I am, are you? Even though you are not of my Army, notâ€|Blue, and still have yet to be graced by my wondrous Blueness. But fear not, non-Blues, for soon you shall soon know what it means to be within the color Blue!"

Fred Oofig had his arms crossed in confusion. "Excuse me..._what?_ I'm not sure I understood anything you just said."

Lord Blue stared at Oofig as though he were a turd that some animal had just left on his new rug. "Ah, but of course you do not! The Greens call you one of their own, yet you are not Green. In fact, you are almostâ€|Orangeâ€|and as such, you're even less Blue than they are! What a sorry creature!" He laughed.

"I'm not Orange!" Oofig said with resentment. "Why does everyone keep saying that?" Then he remembered his armor's coloring. "Oh, right. But I'm not Orange, I swear."

Lord Blue shook his visor. "Your colors speak differently, but it matters not." He walked back up to his throne and slowly sat down in it. "Now then, what exactly is the purpose of this meeting? I have not cared to remember."

Nome said: "We have come to ask you, in person, to attend a War Council which will be held by the leaders of the Green-Yellow

Alliance. We are hoping that you will agree to have your Army join them, to make an alliance of three powers."

Lord Blue had retreated back to his throne and put his feet up on one armrest while Nome had been speaking. "Ohâ€|thatâ€|yes. Sounds interesting. But I think I will have to decline."

The Greens let out gasps of protest. "But why?" Skope asked.

Lord Blue rose from his throne a second time and took an object from one of the pedestals near him. It was a glass sculpture of some geometrical object, transparent yet hued blue. Lord Blue stepped down to the Greens again and held out the object for them to see. "Can any of you tell me why I hold this object in such prized possession?"

Kenny hazarded a wild guess. "Because it's _blue_"

Lord Blue suddenly looked at Kenny with an enthusiastic expression, like a professor who had just heard one of his students answer a hard question correctly in class. "YES, because it is _blue! _Wondrously blue!" He stared deeply into the object for a moment, looking entranced, then turned his gaze back to the Greens. "Now, can any of you tell me what the Green-Yellow Alliance is _not?_"

Skope groaned as he suddenly realized where Lord Blue was going. "It isn't blue."

Lord Blue nodded. "You are sharp despite your disturbing lack of Blueness. Indeed, the Green-Yellow Alliance is not _blue_. It has lots of Green and Yellow, but none of the color which makes the universe go 'round."

Nome was almost aghast. "You are going to deny an alliance simply because the other Armies within it are not the color Blue?"

Lord Blue sighed. "That's the problem with Green culture. You guys don't value Blueness. You aren't captivated by it, nor intrigued by it."

"But what does any of that have to do with an alliance?" Kevin protested loudly.

"_You will not talk that way to me!_" Lord Blue shouted back at him. "This is my Army's capitol world, and my penthouse that you are in. You have no right to scold me, especially since you have so little Blue in you." Kevin scoffed in disgust.

"How fares your territorial status?" Nome asked.

"Beg your pardon?" Lord Blue enquired sternly.

"How has the territorial control of your Army changed since the War of Six Armies began?" Nome asked again. "Because if the Blue Army is really in such great standing, then surely it is gaining territory."

Lord Blue just stood where he was for a moment. Then he said: "Well, the Blue Army's Blueness has never been better. Everyone is motivated, and the Army is active."

"That was not the question," said Nome. "What worlds have you gained since the War started?"

"Wellâ€" said Lord Blue, thinking. "There's the Stretch Armâ€"but we lost our outposts there to the Orangesâ€"and just this morning, several worlds in the other galactic arms have fallen to the Redsâ€"and many of our worlds near the core have been attacked by the Purples repeatedly, but they can still be heldâ€"I thinkâ€". He looked back at Nome again, but meekly. "I'llâ€"get back to you on thatâ€" "

Nome actually did look surprised, but not for the reason Lord Blue had expected. "You have lost that many worlds already, when the War is only formally two point six days old? I had not realizedâ€"the three new Armies are destroying you! Your forces are spread widely, but so thinly that you cannot take new worlds because of the new opposition, nor can you adequately defend the worlds on the edge of your territory. Your situation is far worse than I would ever have imagined."

Lord Blue put on a false complexion and thrust out his arms. "Ah, but you jest!"

"I do not!" said Nome seriously. "You are in danger of being wiped out on three fronts by each of the new Armies. Your situation is dire. You must listen to me, Lord Blue, you need to join the Green-Yellow Alliance. I believe it may now be the only thing that can save your Army."

"So you would have me believe," Lord Blue said with derision, though there was also a subtle amount of nervousness in his tone.

Nome pressed on. "Well, if you are really so confident that your Army can stand on its own, then what is your strategy for retaking the worlds you have recently lost, and then gaining new ones? How do you propose to make up for the damage that has already been caused?"

"As if I would tell you my Army's strategies!" Lord Blue said mockingly. He began to pace, and started to stare out one of the hall's windows as he thought to himself. "I have devised many plans for survival and conquestâ€"wait, actually that's something else. Strategy, strategy. Ummmâ€"waitâ€" "

"And do not tell me you will get back to me on it!" Nome protested.

Lord Blue turned, and he was suddenly wearing an expression in his visor of uneasiness. "I, umâ€"my Army might actuallyâ€"need helpâ€" "

Nome began to nod. "Yes, I concur. I concur absolutely." Lord Blue turned back to stare out the window, as if to conceal his expression from the Greens. Nome continued: "If you join the Green-Yellow Alliance, we will be able to provide you with defense forces, to help you hold onto the worlds at the edge of your territory before even more of them are lost. And if the War does go our way, then we might even be able to help you retake the worlds that have recently been claimed. Right now, it is your best hope. You must do this."

Lord Blue spoke with a voice of cold realization, a well-overdue indication that he had just sobered up his reasoning. "Yesâ€|you're rightâ€|the Blue Army needs to join the Alliance." He then sprung up in posture and danced jollily into the center of the hall with enthusiasm. "Which was exactly what my plan was. I was initially refusing you so thatâ€|I could see what your real motives were. Yes, that's right. Of course! It was always my plan to agree to the Alliance, all along!"

Skope let out a sigh of relief, and Jess pounded her fist into the air as a silent gesture of victory. Lord Blue strode energetically over to the Blue soldier standing at the side of the room. "Communications manager! I need you to inform Ashton Houle and Victarion Halcor that I will be attending their War Council, and that I wish for the Blue Army to join their Alliance. Also, inform all forces to cease offensive operations against any Green or Yellow soldiers. Send the messages immediately!" The Blue soldier nodded devoutly and then jogged off. Lord Blue then turned back to the Greens. "You may all return to your respective abodes. Your mission is accomplished, for I now have every intention of joining your War Council. I will leave for it this evening, and I would like very much if all of you would travel with me."

The Greens obliged, then walked slowly out of the throne room. As soon as they were out of ear shot, Jess exclaimed: "Can you guys believe him?"

"I know!" said Kevin. "How can someone like him be the leader of an entire _Army?_"

"I'm un-liking him on Facebook," said Jess as she tapped on her iPod. "I don't care how many likes he has, he's a shallow bastard!"

The Greens rendezvoused with their Escort Team, who eventually managed to find them suites within the Capitol Tower. As leader of the group, Kevin (who had served as Defense Commander during the Battle of Centerpoint City) took it upon himself to contact Ashton Houle and inform him of the mission's success. Houle was disappointed and slightly angry that the Greens had allowed Lord Blue to send a message to Halcor, as one of the specifications for the Green's mission had been to keep the Blue's attendance to the War Council secret until the Council took place, so that the Yellows would not have a chance to object until the War Council took place. But Kevin insisted that the Greens had done all that they could have, and eventually Houle agreed. The Greens had certainly done their part in getting the Blue Army to join the Green-Yellow Alliance, and that would certainly help the situations for all three Armies in the Warâ€|as long as nothing went wrong.

13. Shakespearean Power Cores

13 â€" SHAKESPEAREAN POWER CORES

As Bradley and his men sat camped behind barricades, the sky turned from light blue, to dark and starry, and then back to light blue again. The Blues had been keeping the Yellows pinned down for more than a full day. Each individual Blue hadn't provided much of a threat, but heavy reinforcements kept streaming down from the overhead carrier, while the Yellow's support frigate was kept at a

distance. The trick with the fuel barrels last morning had been able to keep the tide of Blues at bay a little bit, but the overhead carrier deployed new forces at such a rate that it was simply overwhelming, for just minutes after the fuel barrel explosions, the other side of the seastack had been entirely repopulated with more Blues. Bradley and the Yellow troops on the ground had been under constant fire, unable to do much of anything. Nor could they retreat and leave the territory to the Blues, for underneath the platform upon which they all sat was supposedly a source of nearly unlimited energy, which was powerful enough to easily turn the tides of the war. The Yellows had been sent on this mission by the Supreme Lord Commander General, Victarion Halcors himself, and they would be damned if they returned to him reporting anything but absolute victory. The last day had been filled with the noises of gunfire, which had permeated everything. But recently it had begun to die down considerably.

Gunnery Sergeant Miles Adams eased up to Bradley. "Sir, I don't hear anything right now! The gunfire's stopped altogether!"

"Have they finally run out of ammo or something?" Bradley asked himself. He took out a piece of glass, set it on a thin piece of rebar, and eased it out of cover so that he could see a reflection of the landscape beyond the barricades. He saw that, indeed, the Blues had stopped shooting, and were instead camping out in the open and roasting marshmallows over a bonfire. "The _fuck?_" he mumbled to himself.

"Sir?" Miles asked. "What's going on?"

"It's like they've completely forgotten about us," Bradley replied.

"What should we do?" Miles asked. "Is it feasible for us to make a run for the platform controls and see if we can get into the installation beneath before the Blues have any idea what's going on?"

"I don't know," Bradley admitted. He considered running for the controls. It would never have worked when he had first arrived, a day ago, because his men had been under such heavy fire that there was absolutely no way they would have survived the wait, as the platform slowly lowered down into the installation while he and his men stood defenseless upon it with no available cover. It might be slightly more reasonable now, but the risk was still far too great.

"Hey boss!" one of the other Yellows whispered over loudly. "One of the Blues is walking this way!" Bradley instantly raised his own apparatus to peek over the barricade, and saw that sure enough a Blue soldier was approaching the barricade. After the Yellows had blown the bridge a day ago, the Blues had compensated by laying out a giant metal sheet across the natural gap. It didn't seem durable enough to hold vehicles, but foot soldiers were certainly welcome. The Blue walking along the thin platform was entirely alone, and didn't even have his weapon out, which was definitely odd considering that his side was supposed to be in the middle of a siege right now.

The Blue stopped just a few paces from the barricade perimeters and shouted out: "Hello?" He then just stood there waiting, and repeating the inquisitive greeting a few times, while the Yellows secretly

bantered amongst themselves to figure out what to do.

"For the last day and a night they've been shooting at us!" said the soldier who had just informed Bradley of the Blue's presence. "And now they're treating it like a camping trip, and just wandering over to ask hello? What is going on? I think this is some Bluish trick, boss."

"Definitely peculiar," said Miles. "But then again, the Blues are known for being very peculiar."

"Well they can't spring any trap on us as long as we stick behind here," said Bradley. "But that doesn't mean we can't communicate with them either." He then shouted over the barricades, at the Blue: "What do you want?"

"I have been sent to make peace with you!" the Blue shouted back.

The Yellows responded with a bout of laughter. "I beg your pardon?" Bradley shouted back with derision. "You launch an attack on us, drive away our support ship, and then keep us pinned down for a full day, and now you're asking for peace! Now, just why in the flying fuck should I believe you?"

The Blue shrugged. "Well, it would improve your situation, for one. I mean, if nothing changes, then you and your men will just stay there, pinned down, for the rest of eternity. Or we all die of old age. Something like that. In any case, I think this peace offer will be doing justice for us both."

"Somehow I don't think either of us will die of old age here," said Bradley. "That doesn't seem particularly likely at the moment. Is this really the best you can do? Has your Army so quickly run out of strategies that you can think of nothing better than to send a dude over and pretend that the previous battle never happened?"

The Blue perked up for some reason. "Oh wait, I forgot. There's also this!" He pulled out a digital image from his tacpad, which was projected holographically. It was a form of some kind, and at the end of the text was a huge signature that took up most of the space on the page. The Blue began to read it aloud: "It has been realized that it is to the Blue Army's benefit to join the Green and Yellow Armies in their Alliance, so that we may all work together to more efficiently remove the New Three from the galaxy. Our conflicts with the Greens and Yellows are, right now, only causing our Army complications, and I have had the idea that it is now more advantageous to fight alongside them. Therefore, I hereby initiate Truce Status between us, the Green Army, and the Yellow Army, and formally apply for a place in the Green-Yellow Alliance. P.S.: Blueberry muffins for everyone, on me. Signed, Lord Blue."

Miles Adams was looking at the holoform through his own rebar-glass apparatus. "Boss," he said in a surprised tone. "I recognize that signature! No one else I have ever heard of has worse handwriting than Lord Blue, and that signature on the form is some impressively bad handwriting. I don't think the Blues are bullshitting us this time, sir. I think they really are in truce status!"

Bradley looked at Miles and nodded. Then, he very slowly eased his

helmet above the barricades. To his relief, he was met by no gunfire or artillery. The Blue on the platform just stood there looking very stupid. "Okay," he said after he and the Blue had stared at each other for a few moments. "I think I believe you. Truce accepted."

The Blue did a jump of victory. "Yaaaay!"

Bradley crossed his arms. "So, does this truce mean that your forces will leave us alone?"

The Blue nodded. "Yes it does. We're not fighting anymore, see?" he pointed over at the bonfire. "We're just roasting marshmallows. We initially came here intending to take the installation for ourselves. But now that we're in a truce, we can't exactly do that anymore. But we've still come all this way, and might as well do something while we're here. So it's a camping trip! Marshmallows for everyone! So, um, do you or your men want any?"

Bradley shook his visor. "No thanks, we're fine. I think we'll be on our way now, and actually complete the mission that we were given, now that we're not pinned down anymore." He did the courtesy of waving goodbye at the Blue, who was walking back. Then Bradley went back behind the barricades to rejoin his men. "Well that was completely unexpected."

"Does this new development mean that we can finally activate the platform's motors and get to the installation underneath?" Miles asked.

Bradley nodded. "Yes, I do believe it does." He shouted into COMs: "Everyone can stand up now, it's safe." As the men around him took to their feet and let out groans of long-overdue stretching, Bradley also used his tacpad to inform the support frigate Gleam of Dawn that it was now safe to return to the skies over the area, and that it was about time to send down some supplies as well. The Gleam of Dawn's Captain informed him that the ship was now en route, and would be there in just a few minutes. The Captain remarked at what an odd stroke of luck this was, which Bradley obliged. With that task complete, Bradley then strode over to the machinery for the platform, while motioning Miles over. "Gunnery Sergeant, help me get this stuff working."

"Yessir!" said Miles diligently as he followed right behind. The mechanism that operated the lift was made of much the same material that the platform was: a Plexiglas-like material that was somehow able to carry electrical impulses along beams of light. Bradley and Miles moved the parts around a bit, while modifying a few settings with their tacpads, and then suddenly the ground beneath them jolted. Everyone jumped to attention, for the entire platform was now sliding gently downwards, into what looked like a very wide and long shaft. The Firebase in the platform's corner was rattling noisily from the platform's vibrations. As the Yellows very slowly descended down into the glowing shaft, Bradley mumbled to himself: "And now, to see what lies beneath. For the future of the Yellow Armyâ€¦"

The trip down the shaft took several minutes. By the time the platform finally stopped moving, they were a few hundred meters below where they had been standing previously. Above them, back at the top of the shaft, a spot of light could be seen, a faint glimmer. Now,

the Yellows were surrounded by walls of what looked like clear glass, with lines of pure light running through them. Ahead of them stretched a wide hallway which led to a large doorway that was much wider than it was tall. Gingerly, the Yellows stepped off of the platform and looked around, which slowly making their way towards the door. "Whoa," said Miles. "This place looks beautiful!"

"Very different from the alien installations we've seen for Purple bases," Bradley said while stroking the chin of his helmet in thought. "I wonder if this place is from the same alien civilization. Probably not, because I don't see any dark purple or any other colors like that anywhere here. Yet that only brings out more questionsâ€|"

Miles was studying his tacpad as he walked. "Well, the giant energy signature is definitely coming from behind that door. Should be right on the other side, we're very close now."

"Good," said Bradley. "This mission might finally be at an end." They finally reached the door. Bradley had soldiers take point on either side of the door. Too much had already gone wrong during this op: they had to take all precautions. Once the perimeter had been formed, Bradley walked up to the door, set his palm upon the seal, and then quickly stepped back. The door spit into sections, which then slid into the surrounding walls. What lay beyond made everyone gasp in awe.

A great hexagonal room lay beyond the doorway, glowing from its walls with brilliant paths of light. And at its center sat a huge mountain of glowing objects, all long and rectangular in shape, with a blue glowing section in their middle. They appeared to be made of some kind of metal, and collectively emitted a low hum sound that filled the room with something like a Gregorian chant. Yet when the Yellows listened more closely, it sounded almost like the cores were whispering. "These objects are the source of the energy signatures. Man, each one of these things has _petajoules_ of stored energy! That's crazy!"

Bradley stared at the great pile with fascination. "Just think of how a whole mountain of these things could alter the state of the warâ€|"

Suddenly the humming ceased, entirely.

The group of Yellows looked around wildly. Then the objects suddenly turned their sides to stare at the Yellows, and began to order themselves, moving off of the mountain and arranging themselves in lines. "Bossâ€|" whispered one of the Privates, the same one who had helped Bradley with the fuel barrels the day before. "I think these objectsâ€|might be sentient."

"Fucking perfect," said Bradley under his breath. "The last thing we need right now is another Vincent, much less a whole _room_ full of Vincents!"

By now, the objects had arranged themselves into a grid formation which was the size of a small football field (the room was even more massive). "Who goes there!" a loud electronic voice shouted out from the formation. "You have entered the domain of the Power Cores. State your purpose here!"

Bradley and Miles looked at each other. Then Bradley shouted back: "We are from the Yellow Army. We have picked up your energy signature and followed it down here! We are in the middle of a war with other Armies, and seek a means to alter the state of said war."

"The _Yellow Army_?" shouted back one of the objects (which were called Power Cores, apparently). "Are civilizations naming themselves after colors now? Fucking humans!" Many of the other Power Cores began to murmur in agreement. A humming banter picked up again, the same as it had been when the Yellows had first entered, but settled down after about two minutes or so.

When the silence returned, a new kind of object rolled out of the formation. It was certainly derived from the Power Cores, and indeed appeared to be four of the Power Cores melded together to form a single object: the bodies of four Power Cores placed end-to-end to make a tetrahedron. At the center of the shape, where the four bodies came together, was a sphere of glowing white light. "I am the Energy Core," the object stated bluntly. "I lead this lot."

Again, Bradley and Miles shared a look. "Hi," said Miles."

"So then," said the Energy Core. "You want my people to help you in your war, to serve as batteriesâ€|eh?"

Bradley nodded instantly. "That's it exactly."

"Fuck off!" the Energy Core responded rudely. "We don't do that kind of shit anymore. The Forerunners got all hoity-toity when they first constructed all of us. Thought the key to winning anything was to power the fuck out of it. But look where they ended up! Fucking obliterated themselves! And now, the galaxy has been taken over by you blokes. Fucking perfect, that is!"

Bradley threw his arms to his sides and cursed under his breath. Nothing ever came simply. "Well if you guys aren't going to come out of this hidey hole and help us, then what do you expect to do with your existence? You're all stuck in this place. And who are the Forerunners?"

The Energy Core laughed. "Who are the Forerunners? Who are the _fucking Forerunners_? Buhahaha! Don't tell me you twats don't know who the Forerunners were. Because _obviously_, they're the blokes who made my people."

The Yellows stared at the Energy Core expectantly.

"Wow, you idiots really don't have any idea who the Foreunners were, do you?" said the Energy Core after a moment. "Well, here's the crash course, then: they lived for a very long time, created this huge fucking civilization, then got into some war with this alien parasite called the Flood, and decided the best way to deal with it was to fucking blow themselves up. End of story! Does that answer your question, then?"

Again, the Yellows exchanged looks between themselves. "So umâ€|" said Bradley slowly, trying to think of how best to get the objects to agree to join him. "If you don't want to help us, then what exactly to you plan on doing?"

The Energy Core responded by taking out a glass with some kind of electrolytic liquid inside of it. The energy storage device then sipped some of the liquid leisurely into one of its heads via a small suction tube. At the same time, it telekinetically pulled out an old leather bound book. "Why, my dear Yellow fellowâ€¦we recite poetry."

"It's a collection of Shakespeare's plays," said Miles, noticing the book's cover.

"Oh no," said Bradley, covering his visor. "I hate poetry. We find sentient energy storage devices, and they have to recite fucking poetry. _Really?_"

"Does anyone want to start?" the Energy Core shouted to the formation of Power Cores. "No? Well fine then, I'll begin: All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely playersâ€¦" He suddenly noticed something from the formation and stopped reading. "Chargey, if I see you roll out of line again, I swear I'll drain you. And Tricitie, you'd better be ready to pick up from me after the first line, in feminine voice." He stared with one of his faces at the formation. "Now then: All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

This was where one of the Power Cores, named Tricitie, picked up. It read the following lines in a voice that was probably supposed to be feminine, but because all the object's voices were electronic and monotone, Tricitie's sweetness instead sounded to the Yellows like an old radiator screaming out death throes. "They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many partsâ€¦"

As the Cores were busy reciting, Miles whispered to Bradley: "We need to find a way to get them to come with us."

"I know," said Bradley. "I just don't have any ideas. We can't threaten to shoot them, because if we do, the thermonuclear release could vaporize the continent. And they don't seem very receptive to negotiation. I hope you have an idea."

"Actually I might," Miles quietly replied. He then shouted out at the Cores: "So then, it looks like you're all pretty into Shakespeare."

The Cores stopped reciting and turned to regard the group of Yellows again. "The fuck do you want, human?" the Energy Core asked.

Miles shrugged. "Wellâ€¦let's just say that, not only does the Yellow Army have Shakespeare stuff, but we've got lots more stuff like it."

The Energy Core rolled back over to the Yellows. "Oh, like what? Bet you can't top _As You Like It_!"

"Oh I bet we can!" said Miles confidently as he put his hands to his sides. "Ever heard of Game of Thrones?"

"The fuck's that?"

"It's a story about power and intrigue and stuff like that. And

killing. Lots and lots of killing." He noticed that Bradley was shaking his helmet wildly, and quietly breathing _bad example, bad example. Don't do that one._ "It's um, it's better than anything Shakespeare wrote." Beside him, Bradley face palmed his visor. "And we've got so much more stuff," Miles continued. "Like Twilight, which has vampires and werewolves and teen romance and things." Bradley appeared to be considering punching Miles. But despite the quality of Miles' attempts, his persuasion actually seemed to be working, because the Cores, particularly the Energy Core, were looking at the Yellows with much more interest.

"Hm," said the Energy Core. "Perhaps it would be a good idea to leave this den and explore new cultures. I was starting to get kind of tired of Shakespeare anyways. You know what, on second thought, I think we will all come with you."

Bradley let out a sigh. "Fuck yes," he said under his breath.

The Energy Core turned back to the formation of Power Cores. "Everyone, I have just decided that we are all going to leave with these Yellow creatures. They may be _fucking humans_, but they claim to have lots of good works of fiction similar to Shakespeare that is possibly better." There was a bout of monotone whooping and cheering from the formation, and a few of the Cores actually levitated a few meters from the floor out of glee.

After the Power Cores took a moment to get themselves in order, the Yellows escorted the band of energy storage devices back to the lift platform. As they moved, Bradley informed the Supreme Lord Commander General (via COMs and his tacpad) that the mission had been a success. Soon the Power Cores would be in the possession of the Yellow Army, and then the tides would surely shift in favor of the Yellow-Green Alliance.

14. Hidden Truths and Intentional Secrets

14 " HIDDEN TRUTHS AND INTENTIONAL SECRETS

Richard Face had lost all concept of time. He was surrounded on all sides by a transparent glass wall. It was completely sealed, save for a mechanism that pumped in oxygen periodically, as well as a food dispenser. Beyond the glass walls was the much larger chamber that his cell was held in: cubic in shape, very spacious, and composed of some kind of metal. Four guards stood near the cell, one near each of its corners. The room was extremely dark, and there was just barely enough light for Face to see by, even after he had had some uncounted number of hours or days for his eyes to adjust. He hadn't slept since he had been put in here, at least not well. His body apparently just wasn't accustomed to sleeping in near-complete blackness. He had begun to feel exhausted. At the moment, he was slumped into one corner of the cell, just thinking.

Since the morning of the attack on Centerpoint City, Face had been surprised in many ways. The Purples had led an all-out assault upon the city that had nearly spelled the end of its existence. The Yellows had honored their alliance with the Greens in the end, coming to reinforce the city on its hour of most dire need. The Purples, last Face had seen, were being driven from the Capitol District, with both Yellows and Greens fighting together to repel them. This was

good, because it suggested that Face's capture had been an act of desperation on the Purple's part, a trophy to warrant attacking the city in the first place. And more importantly, it suggested that the city still stood.

Yet the surprises Face had endured had not ended during the battle. In fact, the greatest shock was when the Avant Garde had arrived at Vins³th. Face had had no idea that such a place even existed. It was an entire community, living mockingly close to the galactic core, and in a place that no one would ever have thought to look: an asteroid belt. Yet it also explained a few things, both about the Revolution on Roster Teth and the attack on Centerpoint City: Vins³th must have been where Vorennius fled to, after hijacking the Avant Garde during the siege of Roster Teth three years ago. This hollow asteroid had served as his command center as well as his refuge. Face guessed that a Purple base had existed here even long before the Greens had attacked Roster Teth, because in order for Vorennius to know to come to such a brilliant hiding place, he would require previous knowledge of it. Likely, Vins³th had initially been some kind of mining installation for the Purples. Face greatly suspected this because as he was being led into the prison building, he had seen many structures of the city, and a significant fraction of them looked as though they were repurposed refineries and mining structures.

This was interesting, but it didn't very well give Face any ideas for how to get out of here. Yet at the moment, he was starting to run low on confidence. When he had first been placed in this cell, Face had been certain that he would find some flaw in the cage's design. But this effort was complicated significantly, because he had no idea how he had been inserted into the cell in the first place. He saw no place in the glass for a door or any other outlet save for the air scrubber and food dispenser (neither of which offered anything nearly large enough to squeeze through, even if Face could figure out how to dismantle the devices). And the glass was plainly shatterproof. Face had rammed himself against it numerous times now, repeating until the guards outside had begun to laugh, and all the walls had ever done was make a subtle thud sound. He guessed the material of the walls was some kind of Plexiglas, but modified somehow so that it was many times more resistant to trauma. And that had been the last of Face's select few ideas. Now, he had no idea what to do except sit and reflect on things. He was entirely at the end of his rope, and at the mercy of the Purple Army.

The ceiling lights in the room suddenly flooded on, causing Face to cry in surprise and cover his helmet with his hands. When the adaptive tinting of his visor lessened the intensity of light to Face's eyes, he looked towards the door of the room and saw a Purple figure standing directly in front of his cell. He had several medals across his chest, a primary color of rich royal purple, and many metallic bands stretching around his chest and waist of the same color. Face got up and walked towards the front side of his cell. The figure regarded him coldly: "Richard Face, leader of the Green Army. I wish I could say it was an honor."

Face stared at the Purple figure. "I remember you from somewhere." The figure began to look at him directly in the visor. Face continued: "At the time of the Siege of Roster Tethâ€|you were a colonel. Yes, that's right. Colonel Yoren Stendaar. You led one of the defense forces against my main fleet, specialized in boarding enemy ships and taking them over. The ship you were on was reported

to have been destroyed while fighting in orbit."

"Surely you have learned not to trust your Army's reports so closely anymore?" the figure sneered.

Face again studied Stendaar's medals. "You're one of his inner circle now, aren't you?"

"Do my titles give me away so easily?" Stendaar asked.

"Most of the medals on your chest have icons of Roster Teth on them," Face verbally observed. "You must have helped Vorennius plan the revolution, after you fled here with him. You were one of the few commanding officers left, so he needed you."

Stendaar cocked his head to one side for a moment. "Actuallyâ€¦you're thinking of someone else. I am not the General of Revolutionary Forces."

Face put his visor to the glass. "How many of there are you, in the Admiral's council? What is the extent of his inner circle?"

Stenaar shook his head. "I have come here to ask you questions, not the other way around."

"Are you daft?" Face asked. "I'm not telling you anything! Why would I?"

Stendaar sighed. "Do you want me to have you tortured? You need to be careful what you ask for, intentionally or not."

A small thought suddenly occurred to Face. From what he knew about the Purple Army, it was very unusual for them to send a highly ranked officer to interrogate a prisoner. And judging by his tone, Stendaar was becoming slightly annoyed with the banter between the two of them, something that would not happen if a professional interrogator were actually here in his place. He's here of his own accord, Face realized. This gave him a glimmer of hope, because there was a small chance that he could convince Stendaar to aid him. It was unlikely, no doubt about that, but a private discussion was much easier to manage than a heavily monitored one.

Stendaar stepped closer to the cell. "I am going to ask you something about the Battle of Centerpoint City."

Face actually came close to laughing, his disgusted astonishment boiling up within him. "You're asking me? I think you know what happened at Centerpoint City."

"It is something towards the end of the battle," Stendaar continued. "As the Purple forces were leaving into orbit, a Red vessel, something called the Giant Hand I think, jumped right over the city. Then there was some kind of electromagnetic pulse, and the ship crashed in the Capitol District. The leader of the Red Army is reported to have been there. I need to know what you can tell me about them."

Face gasped. "What?"

The reaction was enough. "You don't really know anything. I'm wasting

my time."

"There's Vincent," said Face. "He's a, umâ€¦a fusion coil."

"I already know about Vincent. I also know that he's been replaced." Stendaar kept walking towards the door.

"Replaced?" Face asked. "By who?"

"I was hoping you would tell me."

Now Face was really confused. "Why would I know?"

"Because you sent Lime Squadron into the alternate universe to stop Vincent. I had hoped this would have given you knowledge of the person orchestrating events behind him." He was almost at the door. But at the last step, he turned to give Face his regards. "You should know that this leader did make himself known at Centerpoint City. He made things happen. Impossible things. A black soldier who sat in a floating throne." He reached for the door controls so that he could leave.

"Waitâ€¦I have an ideaâ€¦he might beâ€¦" said Face. He had to keep Stendaar here, and keep his faint hope at escape alive.

Stendaar suddenly turned. "You _do_ know something." He began walking back towards the cell. "Tell me."

Face struggled to think quickly. "When my strategy officers were discussing Vincent, they all unanimously agreed that, as you say, someone would have to have been behind Vincent, someone who gave him all his powers and also helped him coordinate his Army. We didn't come up with much at all, but there was one particular idea, however odd and unlikelyâ€¦"

"I will hear it," said Stendaar. "Now."

"Do you know of a creation story called the Legend of the Great War?" Face asked.

"Of course," Stendaar replied bluntly. "It concerns the Old World. Every single member of the Purple Army knows it."

"The story states that a war was led by two extremely powerful beings, one who fought for order, and one who fought for chaos," Face continued. "And one idea that came up in my staff's discussion, almost as some kind of joke, was that the being behind Vincent might be Amnion, the Bringer of Chaos."

"You don't have any idea what happened at Centerpoint City after you left, do you?" Stendaar asked. As Face looked at him sharply, he said: "If you did, I think you might take that story a little more seriously."

Face put his hands to the glass. "What happened? Please, tell me, I beg you!"

"I have everything I need to know," said Stendaar. "I haven't really learned anything new from youâ€¦but you have given me an idea, and important one. If that entity at the city really was Amnion, and he

has been releasedâ€|." He turned to leave again.

Frantically, Face called out: "Release me, and I can help you defeat Amnion! Stendaar, wait!"

Stendaar stopped, but only to chuckle and shake his helmet. "Grand General, you really are a desperate little bastard, aren't you? I would never free you, for any reason. The darkness has made you delusional. And now, you shall return to it." Stendaar opened the door to the chamber and left through it.

"Nooooo!" Face shouted as the door closed, and the ceiling lights instantly shut off again. The darkness assaulted him from all sides like a swarm of insects. _My one last hopeâ€|goneâ€|_ He slumped down in his cell again. Before now, he had at least found peace in the fact that Centerpoint City still stood. But after his conversation with Stendaar, he now wasn't sure of even that anymore. Fear and doubt began to gnaw at him, as oppressive as the darkness that surrounded him.

* * *

><p>The first thing Stendaar did after leaving the prison building was to head over to the archives library and review the footage the Edge of Glory had been able to gather about the mysterious black figure that had appeared at Centerpoint City just the Purple cruiser had been leaving. The footage was not very good, as the _Edge of Glory_ had been at a great distance from the city by the time the footage was taken. What Stendaar was able to see was a very blurred outline of something in the air above the city, that looked like a cross between a lawn chair and a throne, composed of some reflective black material, possibly chrome. He then watched as giant metal spikes erupted from the city floor, and entire buildings started to move of their own volition. Stendaar was stunned. This was unlike any siege he had ever even heard of before.

On the records of the files, Stendaar discovered that recently another person had accessed them, and watched most of them several times: Torrrhen Fenrir, the captain of the _Edge of Glory._ Looking even deeper, it turned out that the Captain had restricted a few of the related files for his own personal use. Being a member of the Vice Admiralty, the block was nothing Stendaar could not easily get through. Within just a minute, he had gained access to those files himself. He watched each of them in sequence. Most were just alternate close up views of the black armored figure in Centerpoint City. But the last and most-viewed file was the one that really caught Stendaar's interest. It was an audio recording of a conversation that had taken place just a few days ago in the command dome of the _Avant Garde_. It was between Vorennius and another figure with a low yet mocking voice that eked cruelty. Stendaar simply could not believe what he heard as the conversation progressed. The Admiral seemed almost in desperation at the other person's words, and eventually gave in, as though he had no other choice, immediately reforging the unwilling alliance between the Purple and Red Armies.

Stendaar pushed himself back from the console the instant the conversation concluded. This conversation explained everything about what was going on concerning the Red Army. Amnion now definitely existed, and Vorennius had been blackmailed by the evil entity in his

own command dome, giving him no choice but to restart the Red-Purple Alliance. Amnion's reasons for wanting the alliance restored were still unknown. But there was another matter that the conversation had brought into focus as well: Fenrir had deliberately kept this file as his own personal secret, and now Stendaar was determined to discover why. Without hesitation, he left the archives library and headed to the location on VinsÃ³th that he knew Fenrir would be.

The Purple Army was not by any means an alcoholic culture. However, there were still a few alcoholic beverage outlets within the hollow asteroid, and in contrast to the sobriety militaristically enforced into the majority of Purple soldiers, Fenrir was known for his drinking habits. Just as Stendaar had guessed, he came upon Fenrir in the bar within the town surrounding the Capitol Tower. The room was lit up with iridescent neon lighting that cast the chamber with a palate of cyan, purple, blue, and indigo hues. On the main floor, an array of circular tables were suspended in place with antigrav field emitters. Fenrir was sitting with his crew officers at a table near the back of the room. A security guard popped up to inform Stendaar that Fenrir's table was private, but then slinked back the instant Stendaar showed his ID as a member of the Vice Admiralty.

Fenrir looked up from the table the instant Stendaar revealed himself. "Well, look who it is, men! Yoren Stendaar. I don't think I've ever seen you here. You don't seem like the type for this joint."

"I'm not here for the drinks," said Stendaar as he came to stand in front of the Fenrir's table. "I've come to hear your explanation!" Fenrir looked back at his men, some of whom shrugged. "You know what this is about, Fenrir!" Stendaar insisted.

"Actually I'm afraid I don't," said Fenrir with derision. "Now, if you'll be so kind, please leave us so that we may enjoy our drinks in peace."

"You privatized a file in the archives library!" Stendaar said sternly. "A file of a conversation between Vorennius and Amnion. You will tell me why!"

A fist pounded on the table. "_You bring this up in front of my own men!"_ Fenrir said through his teeth. He stood up violently, shoving his glass aside to skitter across the tabletop. The two of them looked each other directly in the visor.

"I could have you arrested for treason," said Stendaar. "I just want an explanation. Why have you privatized that file? Did you really think that none of the Vice Admiralty would find it? And why were you so determined to keep it secret?"

"Now you listen here!" Fenrir almost shouted.

"Remember who you're talking to, _Captainâ€¦_" Stendaar said slowly.

Fenrir changed his tone slightly. "If the rest of the Vice Admiralty had any idea what that file contains, it would completely jeopardize the Red-Purple Alliance. And right now, that alliance is a huge asset to both our Armies. Tell me, General, are you really so naïve as to think that the Purple Army can win this six-way war on its own? We

need this alliance. And it cannot fail. I don't care how the alliance came into being. We have it, and we need it, and that's all that matters. So when I researched the strange figure at Centerpoint City, and then connected it to the conversation on the _Avant Garde's_ command dome, I immediately privatized it, because I could not allow its information to fall into the wrong hands. I could not allow it to ruin the alliance that is giving our Army a chance in this war."

Stendaar was taken aback by Fenrir's explanation. "You call me naïve. But tell me: what exactly have the Reds done for us so far? We have given them access to several schematics for our own inventions, and in return the Reds have gone off to fight their own campaign. The Red Army is using us. How can you not see it? And the contents of that file are proof of the whole thing."

Fenrir shook his helmet. "The Red Army is the most powerful Army in the war right now. They will help us. They gave us their word, Stendaar! And even if they don't, do we really want to be on their bad side? Have you seen the size of the Red Army's capitol ship?"

Stendaar shook his helmet in disgust. "An Army ruled by fear is no Army at all. The rest of the Vice Admiralty deserve to know the truth. Being forced into an alliance against our will is an even more dangerous gamble than acknowledging a dangerous Army as an enemy. The Red Army's plans will be the ruin of us. We are but pawns to them, to Amnion!" He then stepped back a bit. "You try to excuse this treason as though it is a common mistake." He then looked back at Fenrir. "If you care at all about your military career—and your life—then you will personally release that file to the rest of the Vice Admiralty. Or I will!" He then stormed out of the bar. In the main room, the other customers, having overheard the commotion of the conversation, followed Stendaar with their gaze and then began talking amongst each other in hushed murmurs.

Now that he had taken care of the Fenrir problem, Stendaar headed to the Capitol Tower. It was a decently long elevator ride to the twenty-fifth floor, and soon Stendaar was at the door to the War Room. Vorennius was still inside, sitting in his command chair. The Admiral, staring at Stendaar from the shadows, was blissfully immersed in darkness. Stendaar walked slowly forwards, coming to stand a moment later directly in front of the Admiral's steel throne.

"Admiral," he said hesitantly. "I have spoken with Richard Face, and followed his clues to research of my own. I have uncovered the revelations you intended me to find, concerning our Alliance with the Red Army. The captain of the Edge of Glory, Torrhen Fenrir, was keeping information of this secret from the Vice Admiralty, believing that the Reds can help us. But I have corrected him on that mistake. Soon the rest of the Vice Admiralty will know what I do." He cleared his throat. "I know about Amnion. I know that the Purple Army has been forced into a one-sided alliance with the Reds. I know that the Reds are simply using us for our own purposes. And I know that it must stop."

Vorennius leaned forward in his command chair. "Good. I have a mission for you."

15. The Dagger Strikes

15 " THE DAGGER STRIKES

The Greens spent a leisurely day in Muffinia City. They hardly ever left the Capitol Tower, but had not much reason to since it was such an insanely large construct. In addition to being an administrative and governmental powerhouse, the Capitol Tower was also largely a resort. It had basically anything a tourist or partygoer could possibly want: massive swimming pools, huge game courts, expansive theaters, and rooms with large couches that stretched like fields across their respective levels. And so for awhile, the Green's mission started to seem almost like some vacation. But the evening arrived eventually, and then it was time to leave Muffinia and accompany Lord Blue to the War Council on XBOXL1V. It was still only four in the afternoon when the Greens were summoned to the landing pad where they would travel with Lord Blue onto his own personal capitol ship.

The sun stared like a great yellow eye at the Greens from the opposite end of the city as they emerged into the pad in a group. A Pelican sat on the pad, a spiffed up version which was double the size of a normal Pelican, so that it could fit both Green Team and Lord Blue and his escort team (of a "small" twenty security guard task force). Lord Blue nodded at the Greens as soon as he saw them. "Ah, there you are. For a moment, it almost seemed like I might have to wait for you. I don't think you would be as much trouble if you had more Blue in you."

"Well sorry," said Skope with a hint of annoyance that he almost forgot to mask. Nome gave him a stern look upon his outburst, reminding him that they had to do absolutely everything to preserve good relations with the leader of the Blue Army.

Fortunately, Lord Blue seemed to have the memory of a goldfish when it came to subtle remarks. "You know, I really should have someone give you all a tour of my capitol ship. I think you'll find that it's themed after my penthouse. In other words, very Blue. And she has superior jump capability to other classes of ship. We should be at the War Council in less than twelve hours, so that I can watch it with popcorn."

"And participate in it as well, I should think," said Kevin.

Lord Blue shook his helmet. "On that whole alliance business, I've changed my mind. The Blue Army will not join."

Several of the Greens almost exclaimed in unison. Jess protested: "But when we first met with you, you promised you would! You can't change your mind now!"

"_I am the leader of the Blue Army, endowed with the authority of a galactic superpower, and clothed in immense Blueness!"_ Lord Blue shouted. "You will not tell me what I can and cannot do! If you really wanted the Blue Army to join, then your Army should have made itself more Blue. You could have made yourselves the Cyan Army or something, a color that has significant Blue in it. Green? Ha! It's not enough. My Blueness mocks you."

Most of the Greens now had their visors buried in their hands. Nome stepped as close to Lord Blue as his security team would allow. "Why do you even plan to attend the War Council, if not to join the Green-Yellow Alliance?"

Lord Blue shrugged. "Well, I can see what's up. Get some appearances in."

Nome let out a sign of frustration. "Do you deny, even now, the peril that your Army is in? You have no way of adequately protecting yourself from the Big Three! The Blue Army cannot fight them all on its own!"

"Our Blueness will protect us!" Lord Blue insisted. "It always has and always will!" He began to move towards the Pelican. "Once the New Three are faced with the unstoppable Blueness of this Army, they will realize how futile their campaigns are. For we Blues are simply too Blue to be defâ€" "

The loading ramp to the Pelican was instantly replaced with a ball of fire. Lord Blue and his security team were blown backwards like ants off the surface of a popped balloon. The Greens reflexively covered their visors. When they could look again, they saw the Pelican spinning out of control in a blaze of fire, then descending away from the landing pad and down towards the lower levels of the city like a confused and angry phoenix. Debris was everywhere, and it coated much of the pad in fire. Nome scanned the platform as quickly as he could. He soon spotted Lord Blue, surrounded by his security team like a football underneath a mountain of jocks. "I'm okay!" Lord Blue shouted.

Kevin climbed off of the metal floor and dusted himself off. "Is everyone else alright?" he shouted into COMs. The rest of Green Team responded via COM signals, and the board was filled with a bunch of green lights. With that taken care of, he then scanned the platform. This was by no means an accident: it was an assassination attempt. Kevin's visor moved through everyone on the platform: his team, Lord Blue and his security teamâ€|and then a lone technician worker.

The technician was fiddling with something on his tacpad, as though something vital wasn't working. Kevin saw that the technician's back-mounted power pack had been punctured by a shard of metal that had exploded off of the Pelican. Suddenly the technician's color shifted, just for an instant, and his true identity was reveled: from blue to dark purple and then back again in the next instant. The technician cursedâ€|then looked up and saw Kevin staring at him. "HEY YOU!" Kevin shouted.

The technician ran. Kevin was sprinting immediately. Fred Oofig and Jess were behind him, they had seen the flash of purple too. The technician ran through the door leading back into the Capitol Building. The three Greens followed him in. The rest of Green Team, still recovering from the shock of the explosion, still hadn't realized a chase was on. Skope looked in the door's directionâ€"just as it went sliding shut in Kevin's face and locked shut. Kevin swiveled his gaze and saw the disguised Purple at the opposite end of the hallway. "That should keep them," the Purple said satisfactorily. Then he noticed the three Greens staring at him. "Oh shit!" That was when his camouflage gave away entirely, and his flickering Blueness became a royal shade of purple.

"Stop!" Jess shouted as the three of them sprinted after the Purple, who instantly ducked behind a corner. The Greens followed instantly. The Purple flew through several hallways in a blur, knocking over several Blues as he did so. Then he sprinted into a lounge room, an expansive chamber filled with fluffy sofas and televisions. The Purple took a hard left. Kevin, Jess, and Fred followed, only to find a metallic sphere rolling towards them from the fleeing Purple, making an electronic buzzing sound.

"Oh shit," said Kevin as he realized what it was. The sphere became replaced with blinding white light which was followed by the crackling and fizzling of all electric circuits in the room. The chamber was plunged into darkness as the lights shorted out, and Kevin regained his vision just in time to see an array of monitors explode off of the ceiling and come crashing down towards him. He backpedaled with a tenth of a second to spare, and the monitors came down upon the spot he had been standing with a crash and explosion of glass. "Fucking EMP!" he shouted out of anger and shock. He briefly nodded at Fred and Jess to let them know he was all right, and then the three of them hopped over the mountain of totaled monitors. All around them, startled Blues were emitting cries of surprise and fear, and hurrying to all corners of the room to get out. Fred and the two Greens had to shove past a group of them to get through the door the Purple had to have taken.

A fancily decorated hallway was the next step on the Green's unintentional tour. Jess caught sight of the Purple heading down into an elevator. The doors closed just before they could reach him, and as the doors closed their last sliver, the Purple gave the Greens two middle fingers pointing way up. Some mild cursing came from the trio. Then Fred suggested quickly: "The stairs!" Without hesitation, they threw open the door to the stairwell and began to sprint down it.

"Which floor is he going to?" Kevin asked. "It could be any of them!"

As they sprinted, Jess was fiddling with her tacpad. "I'm tapping into elevator directory," she explained. "It can let me know what the current actions are for all lifts in the Capitol Tower. Aha! He's entered into his elevator's keypad for Floor 322!"

Fred let out a surprised wheeze of exasperation. "That's more than a hundred floors below us! We'll never catch up!"

"Unlessâ€¦" Kevin muttered to himself. Then he stopped sprinting and moved towards one of the vents in the wall.

"What?" Jess asked.

"This is a long shot," said Kevin. "But at Centerpoint City, the defense ramparts had shafts with polls that you could slide down, in case the elevators stopped working for whatever reason. I'm really hoping that the Blues have something similar in case of emergency." He grunted and yanked off the grating. "Yes! We can go down this."

"In time?" Jess asked. "The Purple's elevator lets off in just ninety seconds."

Kevin was already halfway into the shaft, which was about three meters wide, square, and had a poll traveling down its length as far as could be seen. "I hope you like the sensation of falling," said Kevin.

"No," Jess quickly replied. "But we don't have much of a choice right now, do we?" With much reluctance, Jess and Fred climbed in after Kevin. Then the three of them began to slide down into the shaft. Soft blue lights, evenly spaced, made the shaft seem both calming and ominous at the same time. Then the acceleration came. The lights went by more and more quickly. Sparks began to fly from their gauntlets. Then Kevin yelled for them to slow down. They pressed their hands into the metal, and after some moments came to a stop. "Floor 322 is right below us," Kevin informed.

The three of them eased down one last level, then popped off the grate to the stairwell and climbed out. "Glad that's over," said Jess. "Fucking cramped spaces!" She was the first out, and the first to take stock of the situation. "We're in luck," she said as she briefly took a look at her tacpad. "The Purple's elevator hasn't arrived yet. But it will in about ten seconds!" The three of them raced for the elevator. They got there just in time to see the Purple step out.

The Purple saw the Greens sprint into the hallway. He gave them a confused look, bothering to mutter "How the heck?" Then he made a mad dash for one of the doors, and the chase resumed. The Greens followed the Purple into a parking lot. Inactive hovercraft floated in grid formation over a wide expanse. Ahead of them, the Purple was racing towards one particular vehicle, a bulky van with some armor plating, from which they could see four other Purple occupants. "Things didn't go as planned!" the sprinting Purple shouted at the ones in the vehicle. "And I'm being followed!"

Fred acted on instinct, shooting out the propulsion drives of the van. It instantly sank to the ground, making a very loud crash and shattering glass everywhere. Then the four other Purples hopped out and opened fire with assault weapons. Fred, Kevin, and Jess took cover behind other hovercraft. At the same time, one of the Purples deployed a one-way dome shield, a barrier such that they could fire at the Greens but the Greens could not fire back. Kevin sighed in annoyance and frustration. "Don't you just hate clever enemies?" he shouted.

Jess seemed like she had an idea. "Kevinâ€|this shield can stop bullets, but not vehicles, is that right?"

Kevin nodded. "Yeah, I think so. Why?"

Jess hopped into the vehicle she had been taking cover behind, hacked into its control system with her tacpad, and then started it up. "Hop in!" she shouted to Kevin and Fred. They ran over and took the other seats. Then Jess revved the engines and accelerated the vehicle towards the Purple's van. They headed straight through the shield dome without so much as a slight tingling sensation. The Purple's visors changed to surprise, and they attempted to dive out of the way. One was not fast enough, and made a crunch sound from the hood. Jess briefly turned her visor away. "Sorry dudeâ€|" The other Purples sprinted outside of the shield dome and hopped into four of the

nearby hovercraft, which they hacked into with their own tacpads.

Then the chase began.

The five vehicles flew out of the parking bay and into the city air. The sun had just set beyond the horizon of the cityscape, and the city now glowed with shades of azure, cyan, and deep blue, a glowing expanse of artificial lights that showed the Sapphire City live up to its name even at night, and perhaps even more so than in the day. Below the Green's hovercraft was an abyss of flying objects: other hovercraft moving in populous lanes. Jess struggled to keep up with the four Purples. Eventually the Purples separated into different directions, and Jess had to pick one to follow and hope it would lead them back to the other three eventually. The Purple the Greens pursued took several sharp turns, to no avail at throwing the Greens off, before diving down sharply. Jess' hovercraft followed, and then everyone had the roller coaster sensation of falling.

That was when Jess' tacpad started beeping.

It was the worst time imaginable, but Jess managed to tap it with her somewhat-free left hand. "Hello?"

It was Nome. "Specialist Retsis," said the medic. Are you still pursuing the assassin?"

A second Purple in a hovercraft, one that had split off before, suddenly rammed the Greens from the side while they were focusing on the Purple in front of them. The hovercraft shook, and it was all Jess could do to keep it spinning out of control. "YES!" Jess shouted into COMs. "We are pursuing him. Or them, actually. There's four of them." The Purple in front of them suddenly turned to a side, and the Green's hovercraft broke out of its dive in response. The Purple vehicles turned and continued to pursue the Greens aggressively.

Nome continued: "You should know that we are all en route to your location. Given your current vector path, I estimateâ€"

"THIS IS NOT THE TIME FOR MATH CONCEPTS!" Jess shouted into her mike. Then the Purple vehicle to her side rammed the Green's hovercraft again, and Jess lost the signal between her and Nome. Jess cursed and tried to ease the hovercraft away from the Purples, but they were persistent. Suddenly, she saw the two other Purples pull up close from out of nowhere in their own hovercraft. The Greens were surrounded by the four Purples.

"I don't like the look of this," said Kevin.

"I think I'm sick," said Fred, sounding indeed a little queasy.

The four Purple hovercraft clustered into a group directly in front of the Greens. Then the vehicle closest to the Greens threw another one of the metal spheres, which hit the front of the Green's vehicle and began to emit an increasingly louder electronic buzzing sound. "Jess, that'sâ€" Kevin shouted.

"Yes, I know what it is!" Jess shouted back. They had only another second or two before the EMP charge emitter fried all the electronics

in their hovercraft. In an act of desperation, Jess did the only thing she really could: she accelerated the hovercraft towards the fleeing Purples. In the next instant, the Greens were just outside the formation of four Purple hovercraft. The Purple closest to them noticed the Greens and instantly gave them a look, which was reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin after he lost an active grenade down his shirt sleeve. Then the Green's vision was obscured by a blinding white light, and the next thing they knew, the five hovercraft were plummeting down into the cityscape.

Kevin had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to pray to in these kinds of situations, but he prayed anyways. In response, the universe provided everyone with a rooftop. All five hovercraft still had considerable horizontal velocity (they had all been traveling very fast when the EMP emitter had gone off), and so as they fell, the rooftop in front of them quickly came closer under them. Fred had the time to yell: "Brace for crash landing!"

The Green's hovercraft hit gravel and then rolled along its sides for more times than Fred or the Greens could count. All three of them felt like balls inside a lottery machine. Everything about the vehicle that possibly could have shattered, did shatter. Then the craft finally came to a stop, the three of them discovered to their luck that their armor and bodies were still largely unharmed (the outside of the vehicle had taken nearly all of the damage). The hovercraft had been nice enough to land facing up. Kevin, Jess, and Fred eased themselves out of the seats. "How about we never do something like this again?" said Kevin. Fred obliged by taking off his helmet and puking.

Kevin eventually managed to get to his feet and look around. The roof was very large, as was the building it topped: the gravel plane they were standing on was roughly one hundred meters along both its dimensions. Looking closely, Kevin could make out the four Purple hovercraft, all of which had landed on the rooftop as well and were just as totaled as the Green's hovercraft. He saw bodies by two of the hovercraft, but the other two were unoccupied, which meant two of the Purples were likely still alive.

He heard a whisper by the side of his head. He turned, but there was nothing there. Then the same whisper came from his other side. Again, nothing there. Kevin turned, searching, and quickly spotted the two living Purples, whom had taken cover and were both aiming guns at him. "Take cover!" he shouted at Jess and Fred, whom immediately ducked behind one of the steam vents together.

"We both lost our sidearms in the crash!" Jess shouted after a moment.

Kevin cursed under his breath. He still did have his sidearm, fortunately. But he was still the only person who could fight the Purples, which outnumbered him two to one. But after taking a split-second glance, he noticed that both Purples were actually focusing on Jess and Fred. This gave Kevin the idea of flanking them. Waiting for the sounds of gunfire to obscure his movement, he quickly diverolled from one vent to the next. Then he sprinted a very short distance to get behind the same long wall the Purples were taking cover behind. He was still too far from the Purples to headshot them, and he wouldn't get a second change at this. So he tiptoed closer and closer to them, praying that they weren't attentive enough to hear

him coming up behind them.

But then Kevin heard something behind _him._

He swiveled around to see a third purple. This one was much taller and heavily armored than the other two. _Shit, where the hell did you come from?_ Was all Kevin had time to think before the third Purple kicked the pistol out of his gauntlets. "Thought you could be clever, did you?" the Purple said in a cold voice. In addition to his armor, he was wearing a series of metallic bands which wove around his chest. Kevin suddenly felt as though he had seen this Purple before. The memory came to him in the next instant: he was one of the important Purples who were supposed to have died during the Battle of Roster Teth three years ago. Kevin had been shown just a brief picture of him, during a celebration ceremony when the Green Army had recounted its victories of the war. This Purple had been a specially trained assassin who had taken out several valuable Green officers during the early part of the war. Zan SÃ³sh, that was his name, Kevin now remembered.

"You diedâ€¦at Roster Tethâ€¦" Kevin stammered.

"Keep telling that to yourself," SÃ³sh retorted derisively. Kevin was now nearly on his back, pushing away with his feet in a futile effort to get distance between him and SÃ³sh. Suddenly, a blade of pure white light appeared in his hand. _That's a White Blade. Only members of the Purple Army's inner circle are able to use those,_ Kevin had heard. _Which means this guy must be right under Vorennius himself!_ But whatever SÃ³sh's rank was now, it didn't matter, because he had a sword of plasma, and Kevin was completely defenseless.

"_Don't you touch him!_"_ shouted a familiar voice. Both Jess and Fred then jumped on top of SÃ³sh's back, combat knives out. But SÃ³sh was not caught unprepared: he must have had very high-powered armor on, because he was able to fling both Jess and Fred off of him just by flexing his shoulders. Fred lost his knife off of the roof as he hit the ground, but Jess still held onto hers. She tried to stand up again, but SÃ³sh was too quick, kicking her down. Then SÃ³sh brought his foot down upon Jess' right arm. There was a cracking sound, and Jess let go of the knife, her fingers spread wide open involuntarily. "Ahhhhha!"

"Jess!" Kevin shouted.

By this time, the other two Purples had made their way across the rooftop to join their boss. "General," said one of the Purples to SÃ³sh. "What're we going to do with them?"

SÃ³sh looked around at Kevin, Jess, and Fred as though they were cheap trophies he didn't care about. "None of them will make a good hostage. We should kill all of them now." He stepped over to Kevin and raised his White Blade. Kevin closed his eyes and tensed. This was it!

Suddenly he heard the whirring of a great engine from off the side of the roof, and one of the Purples shout out: "_Is that a giant floating cucumber?_"

Then Captain Gage's voice rang out: "Everyone who isn't Purple, get your heads down!"

Kevin already had his head down, but he did open his eyes. He was still alive. SÃ³sh was no longer standing over him, and was instead staring at a very familiar Green Corvette, which was right next to the roof. Kevin then heard the unmistakable sound of powering up machineguns, and Gage's command to duck suddenly made more sense. The air became filled with large bullets, and the two Purples standing right next to SÃ³sh were annihilated almost instantly. But SÃ³sh himself was still not caught unprepared, and as the flurry of bullets reached him they instead shattered on an invisible energy shield, which revealed itself only upon the bullet impacts, bathing SÃ³sh in a coat of indigo colored light. The chainguns paused to reload, and then SÃ³sh behaved like lightning: he rushed across the rooftop in his high-powered armor, almost too fast for the Greens to see, and was all the way at the other side of the roof before the chaingun array's aiming system had even figured out what was going on.

Then SÃ³sh jumped.

Kevin and Fred rushed to that end of the roof just in time to see SÃ³sh in freefall, activating a hidden jetpack system from his armor's backplate. The view of SÃ³sh became consumed with a hue of energetic orange. Kevin and Fred looked around, not knowing where SÃ³sh actually intended to jetpack to: there were no other rooftops anywhere close to this one. Then Kevin caught something out of the corner of his visor: a dark shape, glinting purple in the citylight. And then, rising up from the darkness, came a Purple Longsword fighter, a symbol of the planet Roster Teth stamped across its sides and front. SÃ³sh kept jetpacking off to the side, keeping in the same path with the Longsword and letting it catch up to him. Before the _Cucumber_ could do anything, the Longsword had gotten right under SÃ³sh, maintaining a relative velocity, and the Purple General hopped gently into its cockpit. The cockpit window slid back down, and then the Longsword accelerated skywards. The _Cucumber_ roared across the rooftop, trying futilely to catch up with it. But the Corvette simply wasn't fast enough. The Longsword shot upwards, shattering windows in buildings across the district with a sonic boom. It quickly became nothing but a barely perceptible dot in the sky. Then there was a flash, indicating a Slipspace jump. SÃ³sh was gone.

Kevin cursed under his breath. Then he and Fred ran back over to Jess. She was sitting with her back against a vent wall, cradling her right arm with her left. "Jess, are you okay?" Kevin asked as he and Fred ran up to her.

"My right arm is broken," Jess replied, almost angrily. "I'm right handed. So no, I'm not fucking okay!" She then realized her own tone of voice. "Iâ€”I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," said Kevin. He and Fred leaned down to help Jess up. At the same moment, the _Cucumber_ had come to hover directly above the rooftop, and was extending a lift down with some soldiers on it. Kevin and Fred gently escorted Jess over to the soldiers, explaining that she needed to be taken to the medical ward immediately. The soldiers all nodded and took her back up the lift. With that taken care of, Kevin then sighed. "Ah, what an evening!"

"Is your life always this interesting?" Fred asked.

"Wellâ€”no," said Kevin. "Not until recently, anyways." His COM

suddenly started beeping. "Hello?" he asked into his mike.

It was Lord Blue, and he sounded both flustered and frantic, and the normal highness of his voice had largely diminished "Commander Kevin Guinness," he addressed. "I have come to my senses about joining the Green-Yellow Alliance. The events on the landing pad just nowâ€|they have made me realize certain things. I, umâ€|I don't think my Army is quite as safe as I previously thought it was."

Kevin hesitantly responded: "Wellâ€|that's goodâ€|I think."

Lord Blue continued: "My point is, I wish to join the Green-Yellow Allianceâ€|_and I wish to do so posthaste!_" He then shouted something at someone else, but into his mike, so loudly that it made Kevin jump. "CAPTAIN, READY THE CAPITOL SHIP!" Then, to Kevin again, he said: "I shall be heading to XBOXLlV immediately, on my own personal capitol ship." The fatigue in his voice had now entirely disappeared, and the helium-headed pompousness of his normal self had regained full control of his emotions.

But Kevin had something to mention about that. "Now, Your Blueness," he said slowly into his mike. "I respect you and allâ€|_but please never yell that loudly into your mike ever again!" _He cleared his throat. "And about the Alliance: yes, I think this is a very good idea."

"Excellent," said Lord Blue. "The _Cucumber_ is welcome to travel with my ship, in its same SlipSpace bubble. Despite being a capitol ship, my ship is the fastest thing in the Blue Army Navy. It can get us from here to XBOXLlV faster than your Corvette got you from there to here. Now hurry! The War Council is to take place on the morrow. Well, the Acting Grand General actually said it is waiting to start until I arrive. But still, I want to get there ASAP! For no planet should ever have to wait to be immersed in my illustrious Blueness!"

16. The Greatest Dark General

16 â€" THE GREATEST DARK GENERAL

A butterfly floated above an ocean of green. Mountains and hills rose up from the ground, spreading the wonder of nature everywhere the butterfly looked. The butterfly was happy, because it was newly hatched from its cocoon. It felt liberated by the completion of its metamorphosis, jollier than it had felt before in its existence. It flitted about through the branches of tall trees, enjoying the sun and the feeling of the wind. Then suddenly, it felt a vibration in the air. It started very low, but then quickly became louder. Then the ground began to rumble. Small branches began to fall off of trees. The butterfly decided it was an earthquake, and began to fly off in search of some stable shelter. But before it had gotten far, a gigantic steel drill, clothed in spikes with razor tips which gleamed cruelly in the sunlight, tore through the tree line. Every form of life in its way was instantly shredded. The butterfly tried to get away, but the drill's spin had created a vortex of wind that the butterfly was helpless to fight. It was sucked into the drill, and joined the chaotic destruction of the landscape.

Amnion had briefly considered making his Mobile Lair powered by the

same entirely efficient sources that his fleet ships were. But then he had decided, since there are forests in XBOXL1V, why not use them instead? The drill mechanism on the front of the great vehicle was designed to suck in trees and whatnot, which were then burned in the Mobile Lair's engine for fuel. The exhaust was released out the back of the Liar, which created a massive cloud of black smog that coated the skies behind it for kilometers. Amnion intended at some point to perfect the Liar's energy generation methods, but for as long as he was on XBOXL1V, he saw no need to.

The Mobile Lair design was really taken from the idea of a battle tank the size of a corvette. It stretched for roughly one hundred meters from front to back, and was about thirty meters tall, and was roughly box shaped in its form. On its front end, of course, was the drill. On its bottom were spiked treads the thickness of small houses. Its sides sported numerous cannons and lasers of varying power. And finally, on its top was a command tower, upon which Amnion himself resided. He had replicated his black chrome throne design from the one on the _Instrument of Chaos._ It was here that he saw now, surrounded by a semicircle of control consoles with Red soldiers at them. He stared through the view screen at the devastation of nature taking place before him. _Ah, what a wonderful cruise this is, _he thought to himself.

"My Lord," informed one of the control officers. "We have nearly reached the base. It is just beyond this next hill."

Sure enough, as the Mobile Liar rolled over the next rise, a small Blue town revealed itself. Already, the Red Army had taken out several Blue bases on the planet. But this one held something important, which was why Amnion had decided to oversee its destruction personally. A set of perhaps two dozen small blue colored structures sat before the Mobile Lair. The Blues within had of course taken notice, and were beginning to flock outside.

Amnion turned to Balderdash, who was standing next to his throne. "Tell me, my little Red fellowâ€¦" Balderdash turned and looked at Amnion with a hint of fear in his visor. Amnion asked him slowly: "Do you like candy?"

"Sir?" Balderdash asked.

"Just tell me!" Amnion ordered.

Balderdash gulped. "Well, eh, yesâ€¦my Lord, of course. Who doesn't?"

Amnion nodded sinisterly. "Good, goodâ€¦" Balderdash was clearly terrified, but doing a reasonably good job of hiding it. Amnion then stated: "I think we should annihilate this Blue base, and then buy some candy."

Balderdash crossed his arms. "Um, sir?"

"What?" Amnion said derisively.

"Wouldn't it be better if we, umâ€¦bought some candyâ€¦and _then_ annihilated the base?"

Amnion sat back in his throne. "Hmm, yesâ€¦maybe that is a better

ideaâ€|flattened candy doesn't usually taste as good as normal candyâ€|but, what if we don't even buy it? What if we simply take it from themâ€|and then destroy the villageâ€|" He then stood up and shouted "WE SHALL TAKE THEIR CANDY, AND THEN DESTROY THE BASE!"

At Amnion's command, the Mobile Liar stopped right in front of the Blue base. The Blues shouted a question at the Reds, asking them if they had come to destroy the base. Amnion responded that they had come seeking candy. Out of stupidity or fear (it was hard to know with Blues), the Blues soon brought out a truckload of their candy supplies. Their fear was admirable, Amnion had to admit. Which was good. He always wanted his victims to be afraid. The Blue driver of the candy truck stepped out as soon as it got up to the Mobile Lair. The Lair retracted one of its boarding ramps, and four Red soldiers stepped out. Then they grabbed the driver, while one of the Reds got in the truck's driver's seat and took it into the Liar after the other Reds.

The ramp had no sooner closed again when Amnion ordered the base to be destroyed. The Mobile Liar roared its engines and began to move forwards. The Blues scattered like geese, but to no avail, for the Liar was faster and much too powerful. It was like flattening several globs of bread dough at once. The buildings were under so much pressure by the Mobile Lair that they didn't even bother exploding, they just went _squish_. It was over in less than half a minute. Another Blue town had been annihilated, and the tyrannical influence of muffins upon the universe (as Amnion perceived things) had been lessened.

Within the heart of the Mobile Lair, the Blue who had driven the candy truck was interrogated. It took roughly an hour before anything came of the questioning, giving the Reds much time to enjoy the candy they had acquired. But eventually the Blue lamented, and spoke of an installation underneath the town, of ancient origin. Amnion let out exclamation at this, for this installation was the very thing he had been searching for, the thing he had sensed to be here ever since he gained first knowledge of the Blue base. Instantly, Amnion ordered a search party to travel underground, which he of course would head. The Blue also mentioned that this installation was being guarded by a sizable Blue force, but this was nothing that Amnion concerned himself with, and actually seemed to encourage him, because he started looking forwards to the acquisition of more victims. The first step, of course, was to prepare for the destruction of the Blue force waiting underground.

The name "Hollow" had been coined by Lemon Squadron during their first encounter with a Death Agent, used to describe his minions. The conversation between the Death Agent and Lemon had been recorded in the Agent's armor and transmitted to the Red fleet just before he had died. Yet the name had stuck. Before that conversation, Amnion had had little idea what to call that type of minion. "Armor Zombie" was the best thing he had been able to come up with, but it didn't seem to fit that well. So now, for lack of a better term, he had chosen to refer to those suits of armor possessed by the Replicant AI as "Hollows". And it worked, he liked it.

The Replicant AI had undergone somewhat of an evolution since Lemon's encounter with it. Previously, a virillium chip had been needed to both introduce the AI into the armor and store it. But Amnion himself had worked with its code a little bit, and had discovered a way that

it could be remotely transmitted into suits of armor. No longer was a special chip required. Once the occupant of the armor had died, all that was needed was to send an upload signal, and reanimation would happen near-instantaneously.

This method was used to bring the Blue base back to life—well, not really. The Mobile Lair rolled backwards, off of the remains of the base, to expose the suits of Blue armor. Then the upload signal was sent out, and pretty soon the valley began to resemble Night of the Living Dead. Figures picked themselves up from the earth, then walked with stiff motion to form a line in front of the Mobile Lair. Amnion stared at his new squad of minions. "Excellent—oh yes—beautiful—"

As the Blue driver had said, there was indeed a rather sizable squad of Blues waiting immediately underneath the town, in a cave system. They had heard the base above them die, and were all on edge. They were determined not to let any enemy pass them. However, the last thing they expected was to be attacked by their own soldiers. So it was with confusion that the living Blues and the reanimated suits of armor reunited. The Reds watched from a point higher in the cave, as the Hollows slowly approached the squad of Blues. The Blues shouted at the Hollows, not realizing that their comrades were actually dead, and this gave the Hollows time to get that much closer. Then the Hollows opened fire, and the unprepared squad of Blues was finished before the battle really began.

The Reds came down from their viewing place and walked over the dead bodies of the Blue squad, which did not stay motionless for long. Amnion led the entire group through the cave system. After the electrical lighting, there was no other source of light in the cave, and as the Reds and Hollows moved from the Blue squad's camp, the cave became darker and darker. Amnion seemed to love his surroundings, relishing in the beautiful absence of light. As they went further from the surface, things also became much quieter as well, and soon the only thing which could be heard was the sound of the group's own footsteps. The silence eventually became so intense that for some it was almost claustrophobic.

The group journeyed through the caves for perhaps an hour. Suddenly, Amnion just stopped. "We're here," he said with maniacal anticipation.

Waiting before the group was a massive spherical underground chamber, the largest anyone had ever seen before (except Amnion, whom had known it to be here all along). The chamber was perhaps two kilometers in diameter, and in the very center of it sat a strange structure, which was suspended in midair by a series of cables which stretched from it to the walls in radial lines. From the entrance the group was standing in began a very long walkway which led straight and ended at the structure in the center of the chamber. The structure itself, from afar, looked like a block of blue crystal, a rectangle roughly a hundred meters high with slanted sides which glowed subtly in the darkness. It was the only source of light, and was what illuminated the chamber, allowing the group to see their surroundings and the walkway before them. The journey across the walkway lasted several minutes, for though it was only a kilometer long, the group could not help but admire the chamber.

When the group finally reached the crystal structure, the group

discovered that the crystal structure had formed an aperture leading inside, which looked rather like an entryway of sorts. However, it was guarded by a barrier of blue energy which shimmered in the air in front of the doorway. This was clearly where the Blue squad had stopped when they had explored this chamber, not knowing how to get past it. Yet all Amnion had to do was wave his gauntlet at the field, and it flashed out of existence as though it had never been there. Then he led the group inside.

The interior of the crystal structure reminded everyone of an Escher stairs painting, with odd paths going up, down, and to the side in ways that made no practical sense. The soft blue glow of the chamber created a feeling of eeriness. Amnion privately reflected that the reason this structure appeared so strange was because its geometry actually consisted of four spatial dimensions instead of just three, and so the group was actually staring into a three-dimensional plane (a cross section) of the actual structure. Fortunately, the objective he sought existed within this plane (which happened to be located at the very center of the total object).

Amnion took the group deeper into the structure. The further they progressed, the darker things became, for the blue glow of the walls was progressively dimming. Yet after awhile, the glow began to be replaced with another color, which increased in intensity. The labyrinth of crystal became filled with the glow of blood red. It permeated every nook and crevice, and completely overwhelmed the group's perceptions of their surroundings. Yet this fortunately did not last, for after perhaps twenty minutes of walking inside the crystal structure, the objective finally came, and its color was nothing but darkness.

Walls of dark crystal reminiscent of the deepest obsidian stood like monoliths in front of the group. "At last!" breathed amnion. The final stage of the journey as to do down a long hallway. The only light came from the entrance, and as the group furthered from it, complete blackness began to consume their surroundings. Then suddenly, there was a light! They had reached the end of the hallway, upon which there was a door with a great obsidian vault locking mechanism. In the center of the mechanism was a device of brilliant light that shimmered in all colors. It was the most dazzling thing that many in the group had ever seen. The light was responsible for sealing in whatever dark thing lay beyond the vault door, and Amnion reached out and grasped the mechanism of light in his hands, then shattered it into glittering pieces.

The vault began to open.

It floated off into the wall like some phantom, leaving in its wake a passage through to the next area, which beckoned maniacally to them. Inside was an even larger chamber than the group had seen in any other part of the crystal structure, and it was filled with dangling chains. Chains came down in thick strings from somewhere up above that no one could see. There was a great forest of dangling strings, and abyss of them. The group kept pressing forwards, until at last they came upon what Amnion had always sought.

A mountain of chains came together from the forest to wrap around a strange form, which had limbs splayed in odd directions. Then the form began to move. The group jumped back, not sure if the form was a threat or not. Then Amnion strode forward, arms outstretched. "My old

friend, the time for your freedom has finally come." As if on command, the chains began to unwind from the object and retract back into the blackness above. The sound the chains collectively made as they rubbed upon each other sounded almost like hissing. The chains melted off of the thing they surrounded, until soon they had departed all together. Now, all that remained in place of the mountain of chains was a lone figure sitting amongst the darkness, who, like Amnion, was clad in all black. The figure rose to their feet, and the group could see that the chains had perhaps not entirely abandoned the dark figure. For grafted to the figure's right arm was a long spiked chain with thick steel links. The figure collected themselves with this chain, carrying it like an appendage, treating the chain as though it was a part of him. The figure took a few heavy paces before seeing Amnion, and which point the figure dropped to his knees in reverence.

"My Lord Amnion, at last we meet again."

Amnion approached the figure, extending his gauntlet to touch the figure's chin. "General Anhedonius, my greatest of minions. Rise."

Dreven Anhedonius, Amnion's chief advisor since the Great War, rose back to his feet. "Is this universe ours?" His voice was devoid of all emotion, slow and weary, full of only the basest of tones.

Amnion shook his helmet. "Not yet, old friend. Not yet. But things are in motion for us. It will not be long. I have, myself, only recently been freed from my prison, by a fool fusion coil named Vincent. But it will not be long before our plans reach fruition. A war has overtaken the galaxy. There are six Armies, one of which is under my control. All six of them are currently engaged in a complicated war. The war itself is not quite by my hand, but it will prove to be a wonderful tool for spreading chaos."

"And what of Aeon?" Anhedonius asked.

Amnion laughed. "That fool? He has not yet been freed, to my knowledge. Poor luck for him. He needs all six of his generals to open his prison—and you wanna know what the best part is? None of his generals—not one—has any idea who they used to be. They're memories have been completely overwritten! Ahahahaha! So basically, Aeon is screwed, and that means more universe for us!"

Anhedonius slowly nodded. "Without Aeon and his generals to stop us, the chaos will spread quickly."

Amnion concurred. "Yes, my friend, indeed it will. Now come, we have much more to discuss." With that, the group turned back towards the hallway. The mission had been completed, for Amnion had succeeded in freeing his most powerful general. The Great War had set Amnion's plans back considerably. But now, after all this time, his plans were finally getting back up off their feet, and the chaos would soon begin to consume the galaxy at large—

17. The War Council

When Kevin stepped into the council room, he suddenly began to feel like the small little figment of the universe he had been when commanding in the Battle of Centerpoint City. The War Council was to take place in this room, at the very top of an old tower base in neutral territory near the Halothrii Wilderness. The room was the size of an opera house, circular in shape, with a ceiling so high it made jaws drop from all who came in. Yet it was more than the immenseness of the room that made Kevin feel small. Because possibly the most important people in the freaking universe were within this chamber. Victarion Halor sat in one of the large seats of a round table with a bronze polished surface so smooth that it could have been used as a mirror. Halcor's armor had huge sections which jutted out in promenades, making Halor look like a great continent that was somehow sitting in a chair. The Yellow leader glared down at Kevin with indifference. Bradley sat next to Halcor, and though his armor was impressive, it was simply dwarfed by the expansiveness of the behemoth to his side.

Sitting across from Halcor was the leader of Kevin's own Army, Ashton Houle. Kevin had been assigned to the council to serve primarily as Houle's advisorial aide, because Kevin now held the rank of Commander and had been deemed closest to the now captive Grand General, Richard Face, so Kevin would therefore be able to give reminiscent advice to Houle over what Face would have wanted in terms of policy. At present, Houle was slumped back in his chair, thinking his own thoughts and clearly just waiting for the actual event to begin. He stared at the perimeter of the room, and the seats packed with military officers from all three Armies in the alliance, as well as many news crews. This event was being recorded and broadcast to the galaxy at large. This was the first time in the history of modern civilization that three Armies had gotten together in the same room to peacefully discuss matters. It was a wholly unprecedented event, and one that quite literally everyone would be watching. Houle didn't seem like he cared much for the press. He just wanted to get this thing over with.

Going around the table, the next occupant was Lord Blue, who was currently babbling away to his advisor, someone Kevin did not know. The leader of the Blue Army was going on about how much the room was lacking in blueness, and now only one third of it (the section designated to the Blue Army) actually had any blue in it whatsoever. Kevin suddenly heard the sound of exhaled breath from behind him. He was instantly reminded that Brian was also attending the council, against all better judgment. For whatever reason, Lord Blue had specifically requested that Brian attend, and since the Blues were still within the alliance on a whim, the Yellows were not exactly in a position to refuse, lest Lord Blue go through another haphazard change of mind.

Brian energetically frolicked towards Lord Blue. Kevin reached out to stop him, but it was of no use. As Brian reached the Blue section, he shouted: "Can it be? Jimmy Deargodman?"

The advisor sitting next to Lord Blue suddenly turned his helmet and then shot up from his seat. "Brian?"

"JIMMY!" Brian shouted. He ran over and hugged the advisor. The press cameras of course followed everything as it occurred, to which Kevin was forced to visor-palm. "It's been so long!" Brian exclaimed to

Jimmy as he finally let go of him. "We had this huge thing going, but then you were transferred. We have a lot of catching up to do, don't we? Maybe this place isn't the best time for catching up though. Ah, I can't decide! Maybe while I think about whether or not to catch upâ€|we should catch up, just a bit, y'know?"

Jimmy Deargodman nodded. "So, you're um, Yellow now."

Brian nodded. "Yup, it's kind of a long story. See, some days ago my base was sent to attack this Yellow base in this canyon, which also had Greens in it. And everyone else on my side died. And then this Yellow named Patton started firing these rockets at me. I was shot down, but survived. And then the Yellows took me captive. And then we went on this crazy adventure across the Wilderness which ended in this Red Base, and I got to help make a ramp. And then more stuff happened. And then I was taken to Yellow Command, a second timeâ€|it's complicatedâ€|and there I met that guyâ€|" He pointed at Bradley in the Yellow section of the room. "And he agreed to make me a Yellow."

Jimmy was nodding along as Brian talked. "That's fantastic! So, do you want to know what happened to me after I got transferred?" Brian nodded faster than Kevin had ever seen anyone nod before. Jimmy explained: "So, I get transferred to this watch post, right? And there's not a whole lot to do at a watch post exceptâ€|y'knowâ€|watch for enemies. We have a lot of spare time on our hands, is what I'm trying to say. And here's where my whole life changes: I start baking these blueberry muffins, m'okay? And just to try something interesting, a put blue food coloring in them. So when they come out, they're muffins, right? And they're blue!"

"That's fantastic!" said Brian. "So, that new fad of blue colored muffins that started just recentlyâ€|you invented that?"

Jimmy nodded. "Totally! And then my Base Commander got wind of the experiment, and notified the Azuran Council in Muffinia City. And Lord Blue himself got wind of what I had done, and he was impressed." Lord Blue was listening in, and nodding nonchalantly as the story progressed. Jimmy continued: "So it turns out that at the same time, the Advisory Board in Muffinia City had run out of interns, and needed someone to turn to. And they picked me because of my inventive skills."

Brian took in a breath. "And now you're Lord Blue's advisor! I can't believe it! That's wonderful!" Brian briefly glanced at the outskirts of the roomâ€|and noticed that hundreds of reporters had crowded as close as they could to the three Blues, and had been listening to the entire conversation.

"Oh hi," said Jimmy, waving at the cameras. "How's it goin', peoples?" On other regions of the table, Halcor and Bradley were looking more than a little annoyed at the sideshow, and Houle looked almost asleep.

A clap of thunder made damn near everyone in the room jump. Halcor retracted his fist from the table. "Observers and Council Members," he said in a voice permeated with authority. "It is time for this council session to begin."

Brian and Jimmy got into their respective seats, as did Kevin. The

whole room darkened, with the last bit of light remaining upon the central round table upon which the leaders of the Big Three Armies were seated. As he had performed the fist-pounding, it was Halcor who began the council meeting. "We have all convened here to discuss our mutual plans for removing the New Three Armies: the Red Army, Purple Army, and Orange Army, from existence. We realize that together, these new Armies pose a threat to us all and have escalated the state of the war to a point where it has been formally declared a new war altogether: the War of Six Armies. Clearly, something must be done to rectify this situation."

Now it was Ashton Houle's turn to speak. Firstly, a holographic screen emerged above the table showing a map of the galaxy with colored sections to mark owned territories. "The New Three are gaining territory at an alarming rate," Houle explained, using a laser pointer to indicate his facts. A time lapse program kicked in, and everyone could see colors of red, orange, and purple growing like monstrous blobs as they exponentially increased in size. "The Purple Army has taken no reprieve since their attack on Centerpoint City," Houle continued. "In the last few days, they have attacked several Green colonies and are clearly attempting to push into the heart of my Army's territory."

Lord Blue now spoke. "And my Army is under heavy siege from all of the New Three, though I think the Reds are right now the greatest threat." He pointed to one section of the map, where blood red had created a bulge into the outskirts of an ocean of blue. "However, recently the Purple Army has also proven itself to be quite a threat. Because just before I left to attend this council, a team of Purple assassins made an attempt on my life." He hit a button on the console sitting in front of him on the table. A second screen appeared next to the map, this one showing a recorded image of the landing pad with the giant Pelican in Muffinia City. Lord Blue was talking with Green Team, making his way towards the Pelican. A chorus of gasps in the council room rang out as the Pelican was suddenly enshrouded with flame and a ball of fire annihilated the boarding ramp. "As you all can see, the attempt was a failure, for I am still alive," Lord Blue stated. "However, the Purple Army is no less a threat. Though the Reds are gaining the most territory, I think that we should be focusing our efforts on defeating the Purples, because I am sure that they will make another assassination attempt as soon as they smell the opportunity."

Houle nodded. "Yes Lord Blue, I absolutely agree. In just the past week, they have launched an attack on the most secretive and secure city in the entire galaxy and nearly killed the leader of another Army. I should think that they are the greatest threat."

"_Are you really so sure?_" Halcor suddenly barked from across the table. "There is one Army in the Big Three that neither of you have mentioned yet." He took control of the map hologram via his own console. The view of the map zoomed in to the longest arm of the galaxy, the Stretch Arm. A spot in the center of it was colored with orange. Then Halcor activated the time lapse feature, and that orange spot suddenly exploded to overtake nearly the entire arm. It soon came to border Blue territory, as well as reach the intersection of XBOXL1V, and even approach Yellow territory. "The Oranges have expanded their territory by twenty times in just the last week," said Halcor. "Yes, the Purples are a huge threat, as are the Reds. But just look at the Oranges. They are taking over God knows how many

resource locations, and if they aren't a superpower yet, then it's only a very short matter of time. We need to be focusing on them, before they become an even greater threat than the Purples or the Reds."

"I agree," said Kevin. All three Army leaders looked in his direction. None of the advisors had been expected to actually participate in the conversation, only whisper tips to their respective leaders. Now, the entire room was staring at him, galaxy and all, and Kevin was instantly reminded of how he had felt during the last stand at Centerpoint City, defending the perimeter wall of the Capitol District. Yet he continued on: "When my team was sent on a peaceful mission into Blue territory, we were attacked along the way by an Orange Frigate. We survived, but the fact remains that the Oranges somehow knew exactly where we were and what we were doing, because the frigate actually managed to pull our corvette out of Slipspace. These guys mean business."

Houle was staring at Kevin almost angrily. "_What are you doing?_" he hissed.

"Saying something that needed to be said," he replied.

"What needs to be said on behalf of our Army is my decision, not yours!" Houle countered, his annoyance bubbling into his tone. "Have you lost your senses?"

The tabletop conversation continued before Houle and Kevin got to say anything more to each other. Lord Blue addressed the room once again. "I do not agree that we should focus on the Oranges," he stated. "At this moment, it is primarily the Red Army which poses the greatest threat to all of Blueness, with the Purples proving to be a rival danger. We need not concern ourselves with the Oranges. Just look at their record, if they even have one. What have they accomplished? They exist in one of the arms, and that is really all there is to say. I do not think we should be making decisions based on superstition and fear alone"

"_Superstition!_" Halcor barked at the Blue leader. "Are you daft? The Oranges are clearly planning on becoming the most expansive territory in the galaxy, and you"

Lord Blue shook his helmet. "_Dear God, man!_"

Jimmy Deargodman stood up at Lord Blue's side. "Yessir!"

"Not you." Jimmy sat back down. Lord Blue then continued addressing Halcor: "It should be obvious to everyone that the so-called 'potential' of the Orange Army is nothing but hot air. They have been grasping for territory ever since they have reappeared. This talk of them being a threat is ridiculous. Such thoughts always come from those lacking in Blueness."

Halcor shot up from his chair. "Are you suggesting, Lord Blue, that I cannot make sound decisions because I am Yellow and not Blue?"

Lord Blue turned away nonchalantly. "I am saying nothing, but you may insinuate my comments as you will." He let out a small chuckle. "Blueless brute."

Halcor cursed. "Hot air, you say. You are full of nothing but helium!" This caused Blue and Yellow soldiers from both sections of the room to rise up, and loud voices began to overtake the room.

Houle pounded on the table. "Order! Order in this council room! I did not come here to witness the arguments of children!" The two other leaders then came to their senses and sat back in their chairs, then waited for the room to slowly quiet. "Everyone," he continued. "Indeed, the Reds are a formidable foe, and the Oranges have developed terrifying potential, on both these counts I agree. But I believe it is the Purples whom are worthy of our attention." Halcor crossed his arms and rolled his visor. "Listen to me," Houle demanded. "They have attacked a capitol city, bypassing a Yellow station in orbitâ€" "

"And now I suppose you think that we should all cash in on your quest for justice," Halcor shot back. "Sorry Houle, but I should think we have more pressing concerns right now than vendettas."

"Do you have eyes?" Houle shot back. "The Purple Army is gaining territory almost as quickly as the Oranges. My Army is admittedly their main target right now, for historical reasons." Halcor chuckled at that. Houle pressed on: "But how much longer will their focus remain on just one Army, eh? Eventually, they will have increased in power enough that they will be able to fight on multiple fronts, if they have not already. We have all just witnessed their assassination attempt on Lord Blue. The Reds have not yet made any such attempts, and certainly not the Oranges. The Purple Army is the greatest threat."

"I second that statement," said Lord Blue. "I do still think that the Red Army is a slightly greater threat, but am willing to send considerable forces against the Purples, for they have also been heavily infringing upon Blueness of late, not to mention the assassination attempt, of course."

"The Oranges could spiral out of control if we do nothing against them," said Halcor.

"You still say that, even after what the Reds did to the Yellow Command Station orbiting this very world?" Houle countered.

"I think that we should stomp on the emerging threats, and then focus on the threats already existing," said Halcor.

"Would it not be more effective to focus on both at the same time?" Houle suggested. "Now that the Blue Army has joined us, we have many more forces to send to deal with the New Three."

"That is true," said Halcor, thinking to himself. Watching the conversation take place, Kevin found it interesting to note that Houle seemed to be the only one of the three leaders to be aware he was speaking in front of an audience of billions. Both Lord Blue and Halcor were treating it as just another private conversation. Halcor finally responded: "Yes, perhaps that is best, as long as there is always a sizable force to combat the Oranges."

"I can divide my Army's forces evenly between the Reds and the Purples," said Lord Blue. "And thereby spread my glorious Blueness

upon both enemies simultaneously."

"I can send my forces against both the Purples and the Oranges," said Houle.

Halcor nodded. "And the Yellow Army shall fight the Oranges and the Reds."

"This is good," said Houle. "Because that has two of our Armies fighting against each of the New Three at any given time. This will work. I knew that having the Blues enter the alliance would be good thing." At that last comment, Lord Blue nodded appreciatively while Halcor rolled his visor again.

Lord Blue exclaimed: "We shall send all our forces outwards all at once."

Halcor almost shot up. "What?"

"I something wrong?" Lord Blue asked confusedly.

Houle held up his hand in Lord Blue's direction and stated: "I think what Halcor is getting at, Lord Blue, is that we need to apply a bit more foresight to our strategies. It would be unwise to simply spread all our forces outwards."

"Oh," was all Lord Blue said.

Halcor nodded strongly. "Yes. Before the Blue abandons all his senses, I think a conditioning of battle zones is in order."

It looked as though Houle was about to say something, when all of a sudden the COM lights on all three of the consoles on the table lit up at more or less the same time. The three leaders attempted to take the priority calls as privately as possible, in front of the largest press gathering in galactic history. Houle sat upright as he answered the call via the mike in his helmet, keeping his whispers as quiet as possible, though Kevin could just barely pick it up from his place at Houle's side. "And you're sure it's not one of ours? Surely it belongs to the Yellows or the Blues. Hm, I see. Make sure it doesn't get inside the building." A strange sound suddenly came through Houle's mike. He jumped back again, as did Halcor and Lord Blue at the same moment. Something was happening outside, of that Kevin had no doubt. Houle shut off his mike. "I've lost contact," he whispered to Kevin. "I think something's gone wrongâ€¦" Kevin looked at Houle in the visor, not knowing what this was about but fearing it nonetheless. "But this council must go on!" Houle exclaimed under his breath. "Nothing can interfere." He nodded at a team of soldiers standing behind him, and they immediately covered the nearby entrances. At the other sides of the room, Blue and Yellow soldiers were doing the same.

Houle reached up to the map, attempting to begin talk of regions for the planning of campaigns. But before he could do even that, the Green soldiers that had just taken place at their respective entrance were thrown backwards by an unseen force. The room became filled with a sea of gasps, while the three leaders and their assistants all shot up from their seats. Kevin took out his sidearm and withdrew the safety gauge. The War Council was being attacked, and he would be ready for whatever came through. The media and guests in the room,

hundreds as there were, had figured out the exact same thing, and were beginning to panic. This was going to be a very awkward battle. Kevin could now hear footsteps echoing down the entrance hall to the Green section of the room, the entrance he stood in front of. He aimed his sidearm. He had survived the legions of Purples at Centerpoint City, and he would survive this.

A lone figure wearing a black silk cloak stepped gently into the council room.

Kevin continued to hold up his sidearm, fraught with confusion as he was. No invading Army? How could one person make it this far? The figure had a hood covering their face, and as they moved, the long cloak trailed behind them like a sea of rainclouds. The figure continued walking until they got to the edge of the table, at which point they stopped. The hundreds of people just stared at the figure, knowing nothing of what to expect. An extremely loud silence fell upon the room. Then the figure spoke.

"I greet you all, Armies of Green, Yellow, and Blue." The voice was definitely female, and soft yet penetrating, like the glow of a dim laser.

"Who are you?" Halcor demanded. "Why have you come here?"

The figure spoke softly, yet her voice somehow seemed to be all around the room. "The galaxy has been fractured for a great time, and is becoming even more fractured as this current era progresses. Can you not feel it? Six Armies, each vying for control of all. Chaos is the inevitable outcome. To cope with it, alliances have formed, yet these alliances are merely fronts whereupon each Army conceals their true intentions. I have come to join this alliance, and also to offer an idea, a better way of survival for all, which can not only withstand the chaos, but perhaps repel it as well."

"You do not agree with the way this alliance is being conducted?" Houle asked the figure. "What about it do you consider a 'front', then?"

The figure turned towards Houle, and although the figure's visor was entirely covered by the hood, Houle could not help but feel as though his inner being was suddenly under surveillance. "Ashton Houle, I can see much about you. Your thoughts bleed out into the open, and your intentions can be made known from them. You want everyone else to think that you are nothing more than a humble servant of Richard Face, despite his captivity. Yet in truth, you are not the one that Face had picked to succeed him in the event that he lose command."

Houle stood up suddenly, his gauntlets grasping the table's edge so tightly that the polished surface became scratched. "I'm uhâ€¦|afraid I don't know what you meanâ€¦|"

"Face had another in mind for leadership of the Green Armyâ€¦|" Through her hood, the figure had turned her gaze a few more degrees, and Kevin suddenly had the feeling that the figure was staring into _him._ He took a few steps backwards. "You are neither humble nor honest," the figure said to Houle. "For you have deceived the one who trusts you most, and through that deception you have stolen their power."

Houle was shaking his helmet madly. "I really have no idea what you're talking aboutâ€|whoever you are."

Lord Blue now stood up. "Yes, who are you? None of us can see how much blueness you have. So why should any of us trust you?"

"That's what I'm wondering as well," said Halcor. "You barge into this council uninvited, without revealing one thing about yourself, and then accuse the leader of an Army of being deceiving. Just what kind of joke are you trying to play here? Reveal yourself now!"

"Victarion Halcor, you are not without secrets as well," said the figure. "The resource you have just discovered will end this alliance if you continue to keep it secret."

For a moment, Halcor looked simply stunned, as if he absolutely could not believe what the figure had said. Lord Blue stood up and stared at Halcor. "What is she talking about? Is any of this true?"

Halcor shook his helmet. "N-no. It's nothing!"

The figure spoke yet again. "Ah, Lord Blue. I pity you, for you are unaware that you are being usedâ€|by both Armies."

Lord Blue turned towards Houle. "What is this? I can tell that both of you are hiding something. I can see it in your visors!"

Houle was about to shake his helmet when a voice suddenly came from the speaker system. It was immediately revealed to be a recordingâ€|because Houle's voice was in it! Houle looked around wildly. "Where is this coming from?" he shouted. He was clearly very nervous. The instant the recording started playing, Kevin knew exactly why.

"â€| _in light of events, the Green-Yellow Alliance will be hosting a war council in the coming days, to discuss our future plans for the war. I want the leader of the Blues to be there, in hologram or person, to plan with us. You see, the Blue forces will make excellent cannon fodder. And while I of course won't state it like that in front of the Blue Army's leader, I believe that I will be able to convince him to use his forces as a giant distraction during the coming battles. But only if he decides to attend our war council, which he will not do unless the Blues join the Alliance."_

The recording ended there, at which point Lord Blue let out a roar. He pounded both his gauntlets on the table and hissed at Houle: "You're planning to use my forces as _cannon fodder!_ You tried to manipulate me and my people for your own gain? _How dare you!_"

And then Halcor decided to take a piece of the Green leader as well. "And you set all of this up behind my back, eh, Houle? You told me that Lord Blue decided to join us of his own idea. But you set it all up. You altered the Green-Yellow Alliance, and you did so in a huge wayâ€|all without consulting me. I think it's time you give us all a little explanation."

It was actually Kevin who gulped, because he had been the one to send a message to Halcor immediately after Lime Squadron's first audience

with Lord Blue. Lord Blue had already spoken with Halcor by then, but he had neglected to tell him the circumstances of his decisions. It had fallen to Kevin later to give Halcor a story regarding that, when the question had come up. Houle knew all of this well, and fortunately he had the decency not to try to blame Kevin for everything (which he could very easily have done). Everyone in the room was staring at Houle, and the Green leader now looked as though he beared the weight of the planet on his shoulders. He fumbled with his fingers a little bit. Then he looked at Halcor and shouted across the room: "Well, since we're on the subject of who's been hiding what, let's also talk about this 'resource' that you have just discovered, which supposedly endangers the alliance. I want to hear about that!"

Halcor bellowed: "It's nothing. Keep out of it, Green! You worth nothing but cannon fodder, just like theâ€" He stopped himself just before saying _Blues._

But the Blue section of the room still knew exactly what he had been about to say. Every Blue in the room came to their feet, yelling, and the council room instantly turned into a very noisy place. Halcor's remark also angered the Greens, who soon joined the Blues in shouting across the room. And of course, the Yellows followed. Everything now sounded like very loud radio static, with everyone shouting over each other and no one hearing one another. Kevin looked around the room, and his visor eventually settled on the cloaked figure. Under her robe, she had her hands to her mouth, and was clearly laughing at the whole situation, the situation she had engineered.

Halcor realized the exact same thing. He muttered something like "This is all because of that bitch" and then made a motion with his right hand. Without hesitation, a team of Yellow soldiers moved in towards the cloaked figure. They surrounded the figure and began closing in, tightening their circle. They nearest they ever came to the figure was about five meters.

It all happened very suddenly, and Kevin wasn't sure he saw correctly everything that happened next. The figure suddenly threw off her cloak, which slid from her like water. Kevin caught a flash of orange armor, and then his vision was obscured by a brilliant white light which emanated from her hands. The guards were thrown back by means they could not perceive. Everyone in the room gasped at the sight before them.

Selina Owara, the Empress of the Orange Army, stood holding an object of white light which flickered with all the colors of the rainbow. Kevin suddenly felt more relaxed than he had in a very long time. The light was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He felt his knees gently touch the floor. The light was so wonderfulâ€| The rest of the room seemed to be in awe as well. People were gazing at the orb of light with expressions of wonder, though some were more entranced than others. Lord Blue was staring at the light as though it was the bluest thing he had ever seen. Meanwhile, Halcor seemed the least entranced, for he sat with his arms crossed, clearly intrigued by the orb, but not so much that it took all of his focus.

The Empress spoke: "I have traveled through other dimensions, other worlds. I have been beyond the Fourth Wall. And I have seen things, things about the nature of our universe itself, which shattered

everything I thought I believed. I have not come here to harm you. I have come to show you all the way of peace. For several years, our Armies have been fighting each other. But has anyone ever bothered to ask why? To ask how all of this began? You have all come to this council to agree on a way to destroy the New Three, simply because you fear them. But I offer you another way. We do not need to live in fear. We do not need to be constantly killing each other. We can rise above this. Allow me to join your alliance, and I promise you that we can end this war. Together. Not through killing, but through peace."

Houle leaned forward, so far that his chestplate actually spread out upon the table. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "You are the way, Empress. We shall follow you, and the war will be ended." His visor was unwavering upon the orb of light.

Lord Blue had a similar look in his visor. "It's so blueâ€¦I must do whatever the orb tells meâ€¦the blueness cannot be deniedâ€¦"

The Empress now turned to the last leader. "And what say you, Halcor? Will you join the way of peace?"

Halcor was staring at the orb, but his expression still retained some consciousness. "You are very good," he said slowly. "Very good at thisâ€¦seduction. But I have met someone who warned me about that light. I know what it is, and I know how to resist it."

The Empress jolted. "You actually talked to them. But how? They wouldn't be interested in you. They were programmed long ago to only focus on poetry."

"Times change, and so does everything," said Halcor. "And clearly, you do not see everything!" He rose up from his chair, took out his sidearm, and pointed it directly at the Empress. Owara took a few steps back. "If not for me," Halcor continued, "Your witchcraft would have seduced this entire council to your whim. You call yourself a servant of peace, when the only intention you have come here with is to force everyone's will by brainwashing them with thatâ€¦thing! Well, it ends here!"

The Empress shook her helmet. "Halcor, don't do this! For your own sake, don't pull that trigger. Why can't you believe my intentions are benign?" She held up the orb. "Just look into thisâ€¦"

"TO HELL WITH YOU!" Halcor pulled the trigger.

The room erupted in the next instant. Somehow, Owara was no longer standing in the same place when the bullet went by, but standing just off to the side. She then mumbled something like "So this is how it ends" and then closed both her gauntlets over the orb of light. Then she rose up off the ground. The trance over the room seemed to have ended with the firing of the gun, because everyone in the room was now shaking their heads and looking around confusedly to figure out what was going on. Kevin felt the same way, as though he had just woken up from an odd dream. But then he saw the center of the room, and realized that the dream was still happening.

Halcor was firing at a great light floating in the air. Looking closely, Kevin could see that this light was actually the Empress, cloaked in some energy. Suddenly, glowing tendrils shot out from her

back, like angelic vines cleansing the room of darkness. The tendrils all turned and flew towards Halcor. The Supreme Lord Commander General was not caught unprepared, and he rolled out of the way, moving away from the table and towards the edge of the room. But the tendrils followed him. They were faster than he was, and attempted to close in around his waist, but Halcor fought them off with his combat knife. By now, many soldiers in the room, from all Armies in the alliance, were shooting at the Empress, but none of their shots seemed to be going through.

Suddenly, Kevin had a flash in his mind's eye, and he felt as though he was experiencing a long forgotten memory. He saw a landscape of great green crystals jutting up from a stony landscape, and immediately realized that this was the same thing he had seen in front of the vortex on the Green frigate _Dark Side of the Moon._ He felt the same sense of loneliness and longing, and also thought he could hear voices in his mind, though he could not tell what they were saying. The vision ended as abruptly as it had come, and when it left Kevin could see that pretty much everyone in the room had also experienced the vision—except for Owara and Halcor.

In fact, it looked as if neither the Empress nor the Yellow leader had any idea the vision had come over the room, because they were still fighting. The Empress had floated down almost to ground level, still clad in her silhouette of light, and Halcor was still fighting off the glowing tendrils. Kevin briefly guessed that the vision had been an unintended consequence of whatever ability the Empress was currently utilizing from the orb of light. But whatever the case, serious stuff was still going down in the center of the room. Halcor had been backed into a wall, and the light tendrils were nearly succeeding in their attempt to wrap around him. It was at that moment when Halcor discovered Owara's weakness. The Empress herself was somehow immune to gunshots, but the tendrils of light were not. He fired shots at them, and they all disappeared like wisps. Then he lunged for the Empress. "You are defenseless now!" he shouted. "You're going to pay for all the discord you've sown!"

A ring of Yellow soldiers again surrounded Owara. She stepped backwards from Halcor. "All I have done is show you the truth and offer you peace."

"_Your manipulations have nearly cost us all the alliance!_" Halcor countered. "You are nothing but a filthy witch. Guards, take her."

There was a brilliant flash of light which painted the whole room with a blinding light. And when Kevin's eyes readjusted, he saw that the Empress was simply gone. The ring of Yellow soldiers was looking around confusedly. Gaspd murmurs from the crowds surrounding the room could be heard from all directions. Halcor cursed and pounded the table angrily. Then he shouted: "_I can't take it anymore. This council is over!_" and made for the nearest door. Bradley and the security detail followed him.

Kevin looked over and saw that Houle had covered his visor in his gauntlets. "Goddammit," Houle muttered to himself. "This is not the way things were supposed to turn out!"

"Sir—" Kevin asked slowly. "Do you think the alliance still remains?"

Houle took awhile before he looked back up at the room and Kevin. "I think so," he mumbled. "The other two Armies will stay in, not because they want to, because they have to for their own survival in this war. They need this. We all do. And they know this." He sighed again. "But I didn't want the alliance to be like this, held together by nothing but unstable threads of necessity. That fucking Orange Empress, she's ruined everythingâ€¦" He cursed again.

* * *

><p>People took awhile to funnel out of the council chamber. Everyone had so much to talk about amongst themselves, about what they'd seen. Brian got up from his seat and walked slowly out to the circular walkway which surrounded the council room. It had a panoramic window which showed a brilliant view of the landscape. Brian was looking for Jimmy Deargodman. He found him standing next to Lord Blue and staring out one of the windows. Lord Blue turned enthusiastically as soon as he saw Brian. "Ah, there you are."<p>

Brain skipped over to the Blue leader. "Ohmygod, I've heard so much about you, and I still follow you on Facebook, even though I'm not in the Blue Army anymore."

Lord Blue nodded appreciatively. "Good, good. Do you know why I asked for you specifically to come to this council meeting?"

Brian shook his helmet. "I'm afraid not."

"It's because you are the only Blue in the history of the Blue Army to defect to a different Army. The very first one."

Brian gasped. "Wow, really? I had no idea. That's awesome!"

Lord Blue began to stare out the window. "Ah, but you still have so much Blue in you, Brian. I can sense it. Feel it. Smell it, even! It's an ability I have, you see. I can sense things that have Blueness in them. And you, Brian, you are still so _very Blue_."

Brian nodded slowly. "So you can do that. Well, um, that'sâ€¦weird. I mean, wonderful! It's wonderful. Mysterious. Wait, I'm sorry but, um, what does that have to do withâ€¦anything?"

"You still want to help the Blue Army, Brian," said Lord Blue. "Don't deny it. I can sense it about you, just like I can sense your Blueness. And there is something I need you to do for me. For the Blue Army."

Brian shrugged. "Okay. What is it?"

Lord Blue turned back from the window and looked Brian directly in the visor. "It's just a little thing. You see, ever since Lime Squadron had an audience with me back on Azure, I have always suspected that the Green and Yellow Armies have been secretly scheming blueless plots against me, and the events of this Council have just confirmed it. Brian: I want to know the nature of these plots." He handed Brian a small device. It looked like a cell phone, only it was much smaller. "Brian, as you are now _technically_ a Yellow, I want you toâ€¦absorbâ€¦information from your Yellow

counterparts. Just anything you can. And then I want you to communicate them to me, through this device. Idly overhear something, then find a quiet place and talk to me. Can you do that, Brian? Can you do it for your Army? Your _real _Army, that is."

Brian looked down at the device he was holding. "You want me to spy in my friends. Well, um, I dunno. I mean, it doesn't sound very nice. How would this be helping them?"

Lord Blue sighed. "Brian, Brian. You don't understand. The Yellow Army holds secrets which could possibly be a danger to the Blue Army. I am acting of my own self defense, and in defense my people, the _Blue _People, as well. You would be helping to protect all of us."

"From Patton's shotgun?"

Lord Blue put his hands over his visor for a moment. But then he decided to work with Brian's question. "Umâ€|yes! To protect them fromâ€|Patton's shotgun. Because that shotgun is veryâ€|dangerous andâ€|can hurt a lot of peopleâ€|isn't it?"

Brain nodded quickly. "Oh yeah! He calls it Lucy for some reason."

Lord Blue nodded slowly. "Does he nowâ€|that's a bit odd."

Brian held up the communication device. "Sure, I'll do this for you, Your Blueness. Because to be honest, Patton's kinda scary. So I'll let you know whenever he does something threateningâ€|which will probably be a lot."

Lord Blue rubbed his gauntlets together. "And everyone else, Brian. Yes, let me know about _everyone_ elseâ€|"

18. Looking Inconspicuous

18 â€" LOOKING INCONSPICUOUS

Patton slammed his gauntlet down on the tabletop. "I don't fucking believe this!"

Despite his protest, the television continued to broadcast the events of the War Council. A Yellow reporter stood just outside the council room. "It is unknown just what effect these events will have on the relations between the Yellow, Green, and Blue Armies. None of the leaders of the YGB Alliance have yet stated that they are succeeding, but everyone is holding their breathsâ€|"

Hearts shifted in his seat on the other side of the kitchen table. "Well, let's look on the bright side, Pinkie. At least _everyone_ in the aristocracy of the Alliance, from all Armies, is dropping in popularity. Because one thing I've found is, if things are looking bad for you, than it's better for them to be looking bad for everyone else as well, no being the sorry one out. It's actually the Alliance _in general_ that's no longer popular, not just the Yellow Army."

Patton nodded slowly. "That's true I guess. But still, things sure as

fuck should have gone better. If it hadn't been for the Empress barging in, crashing the council, and creating general chaos, things would've turned out beautifully." He chuckled sarcastically. "She said she was an agent of peace or some shit like that. Well I can tell you, she's certainly just expended the only peace she can expect from the Alliance, that's for _damn _sure."

"I still don't really understand what all the hubbub is about," said Tom. "I mean, all the Empress did was reveal that the Greens orchestrated the Blue Army's joining into the Alliance, and also that our own Army is hiding _something_ regarding energy production. With the Alliance being this young, why would people not think there are secret plans going on for each of the Armies? I mean, aren't these kinds of secrets to be expected?"

"They're not supposed to be revealed in this way," Hester explained. "Of course people expected it, but they came out at a time when the Alliance was undergoing a valuable strategy session. Good relations weren't the only things lost by the Empress' intrusion. Because of what has happened, the Alliance now has no definite set of strategies it can agree on. Right before the Empress came in, they had something going where each Army would focus on two of the New Three, and it probably would have been an effective overall tactic. But now with the discord the Empress has caused, that kind of thing may not fly. Patton is right in that the Empress definitely wasn't an agent of peace. She intended to deny the Alliance an effective strategy, and I think that was her real goal the whole time. The Alliance is now at a severe disadvantage because of what she's done, and the New Three have gained a slightly larger foothold in the war."

The others noticed that Hearts was looking at something, and turned to find Brain standing in the doorway to the kitchen, just behind Patton's chair. Brain had just returned from the War Council, though it was unknown exactly how long he had been listening to Lemon's conversation. He held himself rigidly, with his arms crossed. He was leaning with one leg bent behind him, such that his left shoulder touched one side of the doorframe. "Hello Brian," said Tom. "Do you want something?"

Brain shook his head slowly. "Uh no, thanks. Don't mind me. I'm justâ€¦|hanging outâ€¦|totally _cool_ and all thatâ€¦|oh yeahâ€¦|"

"Has he found alcohol somehow?" Hester asked.

Wren shook her helmet. "I don't think we have any in the base, as per regulationsâ€¦|do we?"

"No, I don't think we do," said Tom.

"I'm just chillin'," said Brain. "I justâ€¦|got _totally_ back from that War Council. So I came in here andâ€¦|uhâ€¦|decided to make myself a sandwich. YEEEEAAAAHH. A really _awesome_ sandwich. So, uh, that's what I'm gonna doâ€¦|" He began walking over to the counter. He swung his hips violently, while stomping loudly on the floor.

Hearts shook his helmet. "If this is Brian trying to be cool, then I'd hate to be around him when he's pissed."

"Don't mind me," said Brian. "I'll just be over hereâ€¦|making my _sandwich._"

As Brian moved by them, Lemon noticed a black plastic object dangling from his tool belt. "Is that a tape recorder?" Wren asked. "Brian, why are you carrying a tape recorder?"

Patton sat his glass of lemonade down forcefully on the tabletop. "Blueâ€|are you _listening_ to our conversation? Eavesdropping?"

Brain instantly halted his journey across the kitchen. Then he flung out his arms and waved them around himself in the largest and most overblown shrug that anyone in Lemon had ever seen before. "Whyâ€|_nauggggh!_ Of course not. I mean, that's ridiculous. Your militaryâ€|thingsâ€|don't concern me. I'm just makin' my sandwich. My Super Special Awesome Sandwich of Doom 3000!"

"Make your sandwich and then get out," said Hester. Brian slumped in his posture, then dumped an insane amount of peanut butter and jam on a piece of toast, and walked out of the room carrying his mountain of goo with him, bearing a dejected look about him.

"That former Blue is up to something," Wren muttered.

"You don't say," said Tom.

* * *

><p>Brian wandered through the base for several moments, wondering where he should eat his Super Special Awesome Sandwich of Doom 3000. He wasn't feeling particularly spiffy at the moment, for his attempts to monitor Lemon Squadron were not going very spectacularly. He had thought that he would be more adept at looking Cool, and had even watched several videos of John Wayne on YellowTube to make sure he acted everything right. But somehow, Lemon had seen straight through his acting. This would complicate his efforts to gain information from them. But before he talked to Lord Blue, he decided it would be best to see what else was going on in the base. After all, he wanted to report something to Lord Blue.

He headed for the quarters of the base, since that was where the greatest concentration of people could usually be found. Upon entering the quarters hallway, he discovered that the door to Travis Chamaelon's room was open, and there were voices coming out of it. Peeking in, he saw both Travis and Guy Dudeperson, sitting in front of a desk, which had an array of playing cards spread out upon it. The two of them were talking amongst themselves, regarding the cards. Brain edged himself close to the door, so as to watch without being noticed, turning on his recorder again to listen to what they were saying. Then he began eating his Super Special Awesome Sandwich of Doom 3000 as he listened.

"I noticed this right after we got back from Centerpoint City," said Travis to Guy.

"I'm still not convinced this isn't a trick or something," said Guy.

"It's not," said Travis. "How many times do I have to show it to you?" He gathered up the cards into a pile and then folded them into a deck. He then handed the deck over to Guy, who thoroughly shuffled

it. Travis pointed at the top card of the deck. "This will be a three of spades."

Guy flipped over the card. "_Dude, _that's seriously nuts!" From his angle, Brian couldn't actually see the card, but from the expression on the Red's visor, the correctness of Travis' guess was quite obvious. Guy set the deck back on the desk with a hard thump. "Let's try something different." He took from a holder a six-sided die. "Call it."

"Six."

Guy cupped his hands together (with the die inside them) and then rolled the object around a bit. Then he opened his palms, and the die dropped to the floor. It bounced around a few times, and when it eventually stoppedâ€|a six glared upwards. Guy rolled the die a few more times, and each time Travis predicted the roll correctly. After the fifth roll, Guy gathered up the die and put it back. "Hmâ€|let's try something harderâ€|" He picked up a die shaped in an icosahedron, which had twenty triangular sides. He had Travis call it, then he rolled it. And of course, Travis got it right. They repeated with that die a few more times. Then Guy stood back and shook his helmet slowly. "Unfriggenbelievable, dudeâ€|"

Travis nodded. "I know, it's crazy."

"I should tell the others," Guy verbally thought to himself.

Travis started. "No-wait, I don't think that's a good idea. I mean, the Yellows do trust us _better_ after Centerpoint Cityâ€|they're not keeping us as prisoners, at leastâ€|but I don't think they'll be very receptive to this kind of thing. Least of all Patton. He'll definitely chalk this up as some kind of trick no matter how many times we demonstrate it in front of him."

Guy nodded. "Yeah, you're right. But what, then? Do we try to hide it?"

Travis shrugged. "I dunno. I just thinkâ€|we should keep a low profile about it for now, until we find some better way of proving it."

Guy sighed. "Yup, that probably is what we should do. Well, see ya, then." He turned to leave. Brian instinctively lunged out of the doorway just as Guy turned. Guy walked out into the hallway, turning away from Brian by an act of God, and wandering down to the far exit, having completely overlooked a Yellow-clad former Blue huddled into a ball right outside Travis' door with jelly-covered fingertips.

Brian waited until Guy had passed and Travis had shut his door. Then he got up and headed into his own quarters. He made sure his door was closed, then flopped down on his bed and took out the communications device Lord Blue had given him at the end of the War Council. He hadn't learned much, but he had gleaned a few things about the others in the base. He pressed the activation button, a large green protrusion poking out the object's side. A face instantly materialized on the device's screen. Brian perked up instantly.

"JIMMY!"

Jimmy Deargodman perked up as well, from wherever he was on the other

end of the communication line. "BRIAN!" he shouted. "I've been waiting for you to use this device for awhile now."

"I thought it would connect me to Lord Blue," said Brain.

"Well he's busy like the whole freaking time," said Jimmy. "And I'm his assistant, so I get to talk to you."

"AWESOME!" shouted Brain.

"I know, right? Totally!" Then he stopped his exclamation right there.

Brian got an odd feeling, and he suddenly remembered how Jimmy had just stood there, after the War Council, when Brain had talked with Lord Blue. "Is everything okay, dude?"

Jimmy nodded his helmet. "Yeah, totally. It's all good. Why wouldn't it be?"

Brian shrugged. "I dunno, you just seemed kindaâ€¦well, never mindâ€¦"

There was a short moment of silence, but Jimmy soon perked up again. "So, do you have anything to tell us about the base?"

Brain shrugged. "Well, I do have some stuff. It's not much though."

"Lord Blue wants to know anything you can tell him," said Jimmy.

So Brain proceeded to mention everything, first playing both conversations he had overheard via the tape recorder, and then giving his interpretations of those events. All the time, Jimmy simply nodded along, in some places bothering to voice a subtle opinion. In general, he did not seem very interested in Travis' new ability to predict dice rolls, probably thinking it just a trick (a possibility which had not occurred to Brian until that moment). He showed slightly more interest towards the recorded conversation between members of Lemon Squadron. Though that whole conversation was really just Lemon voicing their opinions of what had happened during the War Council, Jimmy seemed pleased that he was being shown how Lemon thought, and mentioned that Lord Blue might be interested to hear that conversation for himself. He showed Brian the steps to go through to use the communications device to upload audio files. This took a considerable amount of time, because Brain kept getting confused over what Jimmy considered the most straight-forward of details. But eventually Brain got it right, and then both of them let out a huge sigh.

At that point, it seemed as though both of them were about ready to do something else. "It's been nice seeing you again, dude," said Jimmy.

"_Totally, _dude!" Brian exclaimed. "And the best part about all this is, I get to talk to you whenever I discover something!"

Jimmy sighed. "â€¦Yeahâ€¦"

"Dude?"

"It's been nice seeing you Brian," said Jimmy. "I look forward to meeting you again." He bowed his head towards the camera. Then the screen went black.

"Nice seeing you tooâ€|" said Brain, slightly confused at Jimmy's final mannerisms.

19. The Race To Betrayal

19 â€" THE RACE TO BETRAYAL

As Selina Owara first gazed upon the Purple kneeling in front of her, she wasn't immediately sure if she should listen to his words or just have him executed. The Purple had spoken concisely, putting each word in his sentences to the greatest use possibleâ€|and also revealing how rehearsed they all were. And yetâ€|she could not deny the potential advantages of listening to him. His message had turned out to be the last thing she had ever expected. And if his message was trueâ€|then her Army was being presented with a huge advantage in the war.

Roughly an hour ago, a lone Purple fighter had been spotted flying in towards Strongenheim. All defense systems had been instantly trained upon it, for in case it contained a nuclear weapon it intended to deploy on the city. But all scans had come up negative for radioactive materials on the craft. That was when the craft had sent out a radio transmission to the city: the person inside was a Purple emissary and a member of the Vice Admiralty of his Army. He had stated that he came in peace, and wanted only to talk to the Empress in person. The city's weapons systems had been ready to blow the Purple craft out of the airâ€|until the Purple had mentioned that his Army as being secretly controlled by Amnion. At that point, Owara had immediately ordered the Purple brought in to her. The Purple had his gauntlets bound, and was led into the throne room surrounded by a ring of Orange security guards, who would make sure he wasn't able to try anything while in the Empress' presence. Once in front of her throne, the Purple had kneeled, and then the Empress had demanded that he speak. He had spoken, and now the Empress was to decide his fate.

"Yoren Stendaar," said the Empress slowly, feeling each syllable as she exhaled it. "I have heard much about you. You are not, and never have been, a friend to the Orange Army. You have performed many deeds, most of them not being what my Army would consider moral."

Stendaar looked up slightly. "Is the content of my message to be judged based upon my own morality? I am but a messenger. It is by the will of the Admiral that I have come hereâ€|and put my own life at risk."

The Empress nodded. "Yes, so you haveâ€|"

"We believe that a secret alliance can be used to defeat the Reds. Together, we can bring down Amnion."

The Empress sat back in her throne. "So you have said."

"But surely," Stendaar insisted. "You have been beyond the Fourth Wall. You know of Amnion's true power"

"I do not," the Empress corrected sternly.

"But the Quantum Manipulator"

"I have my suspicions of Amnion's capabilities," she elaborated. She got up from her throne and walked slowly to the wide window looking out from the center of the city, to everything below. Artificial lights the color of bright fire created a sea of brightness emanating from the many tall buildings within the dome. Thousands of people rushed through the streets on everyday tasks while many levels of hovercraft zoomed about in defined grid formations. Staring calmly at her city, the Empress continued: "I have seen much. My Army has seen much. It is impossible to describe our journey. However, we know that the Old World did exist, and this proof has come with implications which have shattered everything I thought I knew about our universe and the others. We are all"

"Yes?" Stendaar pushed.

The Empress shook her helmet. "It is a conversation for another place and time. I will not share such revelations with the likes of you."

"But I have come offering an Alliance!" Stendaar protested.

The Empress looked back at him. "And just what would this Alliance gain my Army?" she asked accusingly. "And if your Admiral honestly cared then why did he send you? I know of what you did to my Army, Stendaar. Four years ago: it was closer to the beginning of all than you could possibly realize, and you wasted no time in your performance of atrocities. I know that you were the one who secretly implanted the Yellow-Blue Alliance with information regarding my Army's presence on Earth. That was all they needed to finish their campaign of destruction. They did. And no doubt, you and your 'orderly efficient' Army had in mind that I, and all of the people who now live within this city, would die as well, and it was only by a small fluke of probability that we did not. It is true that if the Battle of Earth had not happened, my people would never have been sent on their journey of enlightenment. But I can never forget your sins nor ever trust you" Stendaar._"

The Purple was looking up and staring at her with shock. "_How_ did you know that?" he asked. "How could you possibly know that the idea to implant information came from me?"

"I can see many things," said the Empress. "Did you learn _anything_ from watching the War Council?"

Stendaar shook his helmet. "What the hell did you find during your journey through the other universes?" He then looked up again. "But my question still remains: how exactly do you plan to deal with Amnion on your own? He has the Red Army in his gauntlets like a puppet on strings, and very soon the same will happen to my Army, if it has not already. He will settle for nothing more than total domination over all life. You cannot possibly expect to stand against him on your own."

"My question still stands as well, Stendaar," said the Empress, turning from the window to look directly at him. "What would my Army gain by joining yours? The Reds would find out eventually, and then they would attack. There is also the fact that I simply have no way of trusting you, and especially not your Admiral. I know how that man thinks: everything is always a move in some chess game. Every decision he makes must always be part of some grand plan which benefits only him in the end. I don't understand why any of you Purple fools choose to follow him. Any alliance with him is destined for betrayal. Except in your case: the Reds have beaten him to it."

"What if I told you I know of something which can guarantee you a permanent advantage over the Reds, even despite the size of their ships?"

The Empress turned back to the window. "The Admiral does not know me very well."

Stendaar let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm not lying to you. Just listen: the Yellows recently found somethingâ€"excavated itâ€"on the other side of the planet. Surely you are aware of this."

The Empress nodded slightly. "Whether or not I have you executed will depend upon where you're going with this."

Stendaar began to talk more quickly. "My Army has intercepted some of their transmissions, so we have an idea what went on there: What they took out of the excavation site were a series of devices which call themselves Power Cores."

"Call themselves?" asked the Empress with a hint of confusion.

Stendaar continued: "The point is, these devices can individually store an insane amount of potential energy. Together, they could power an extragalactic civilization for a hundred years. Do you remember the seismic activity underneath that hydroelectric facility, nine days ago? It was caused by the detonations of a slightly different kind of device, yet these were much less efficient at storing energy, by several orders of magnitude, and yet they were able to generate an earthquake from several hundred meters underground. So just imagine what the Power Cores can do."

The Empress' interest was at least slightly piqued. She turned again from the window. "Continue."

Stendaar took a small breath and then did so. "My Army has many agents stationed on this world. And they have detected with certainty an even greater concentration of these Power Cores, in an installation underground."

The Empress walked back over to him. She stared down at him for a moment, and Stendaar could almost hear the gears working in her mind. Finally she spoke again: "Perhaps the Admiral did have some sense in asking for an alliance. Now, I must explain to you that, while I do not know the full extent of Amnion's capabilities, I can still certainly help you to defeat him, though the main work towards doing so will have to be performed by your own Army. In any event, this information you have provided me does seemâ€|advantageous. And if

your Army assists mine in acquiring even some of these Power Cores then I would be willing to assist you in defeating Amnion."

Stendaar let out an instant sigh of relief. At the same moment, the guards removed the binds on his gauntlets, and he stood up, slightly exercising his arms to get his circulation back on order. "I thank you, Empress!"

"You can thank me when Amnion is gone," was her response. "Now then: were exactly are these Power Cores?"

"I can give you the exact coordinates once I have returned to my Army," said Stendaar. "I don't have the coordinates with me, for in case you had declined the alliance offer. But I can tell you their general whereabouts."

The Empress nodded. "A proof of your sincerity."

"The installation is located below the Trevelyan Fields."

The Empress put her gauntlets to her helmet in thought. "Trevelyan. Interestingâ€¦" The Fields of Trevelyan were a wide expanse of plainsland, roughly two hundred kilometers across, its center situated a thousand kilometers north of the Halothrii Wilderness. It was by far the greatest expanse of flatness on the entire planet, a space that seemed almost endless when one stood upon it. The land had already seen dozens of battles: Two and a half years ago, the territory had been claimed by a Blue warlord name Johannes Trevelyan, who had set up a base the size of a city from which he had intended to reach out to the rest of the globe. Yet only three months after it had been completed, it had been attacked and utterly destroyed by the Greens when they had fired upon it from orbit with a series of frigates. Since then, the land had dissolved into the utter chaos of war, with all sides fighting over it and none succeeding (though the Wilderness still far outpaced it in terms of frequency of bloodshed). The whole of the fields were pockmarked with remnants of Trevelyan's once great base, which were now only used for cover or brief camping sites.

Stendaar straightened up. "So thenâ€¦shall I look forward to seeing your Army at Trevelyan Fields?"

The Empress nodded. "Go now, in peace. Your weapons and other possessions shall be returned to you once you leave this city."

Stendaar nodded and then left, striding with a relived confidence down the hall of the throne room and then through the expansive doorway. As the great doors closed behind him, the Empress returned to her seat of power and further contemplated exactly how she would use this turn of events to her advantage.

* * *

><p>Solienne Tarl did not normally question the orders of his Empress, but he did so in that moment, just as she was settling into her own thoughts. He stepped forward, coming to stand right in front of her throne. "Empressâ€¦"<p>

Her visor looked up at him.

"Do you realize the risks involved in allying with them?"

"Of course." Her tone suggested that she was wondering why he would even ask that question. He just stood there, the two of them looking at each other for several seconds. Finally, the Empress mentioned: "You are wanting an explanation, yes?"

Tarl nodded. "I know it is not my place, Empress, but forgive me."

The Empress chuckled. "My loyal servant, of course you are forgiven. Were I in your place, I would be just as adamant for answers as you are. Yes, my decision no doubt would seem strange. But of course, my intentions are far different than Stendaar has been led to believe."

"Will we join them at Trevelyan?"

"We will. I am counting on it, in fact."

This caused Tarl's expression to become even more confused. "And your intentions?"

"I should show you," the Empress responded with purpose. "You will need to know before you arrive at Trevelyan. You might as well be shown now." She got up from her throne and walked towards the door. "Walk with me, my good General."

Tarl followed behind her. She led him through the halls of the palace and down to the ground levels, where a transport was waiting for them: a floating object of curved surfaces which were decked out in orange chrome. Once inside the hovercraft, the pilot carried them away from the palace and through the city. The flight was a tour filled with sights of flame and large lines of metal: the city was powered by hydrothermal engines, and the infrastructure was mainly steel, so the city looked from above like a furnace composed of skyscrapers. Yet it did not look evil or hellish, for there existed many parks and forests all over the city which served hydroponics purposes and took out most of the carbon dioxide released from the engines. It was a very unusual sight, a contrast between nature and industry, and one which Tarl had never gotten too used to looking at. The hovercraft took them to an edge of the city, to a dome-shaped structure tall enough to rise above most of the other buildings in its area. The air vehicle circled the dome a few times, the pilot waiting until a safe landing site had been confirmed, and then the craft set down just in front of the main entrance.

The Empress walked brusquely towards the dome, Tarl keeping up right behind her. As they neared the dome, Tarl noticed a small feeling within him, a stirring of awe and wonder that he could not place. It was the same feeling he had experienced when the Empress had first shown him the core of the Quantum Manipulator. They progressed through the entrance of the building. A wide metal hallway stretched before them, crowded with a small army of people in lab coats working at computers. The place was lit with florescent lights, and much of the far wall was covered in foil, hinting at the nature of what lay beyond. As the two of them entered, one of the scientists got up from his console and informed the Empress: "It has been properly installed. Now, it will only be a short matter of time before the

weapon is ready to be deployed."

The Empress nodded at him. "Things are progressing wonderfully."

Tarl looked at her. "What weapon? Why do I not know about this?"

The Empress only continued walking down the hallway. "Your answer lies in the next chamber. This is only a very recent idea, one I had immediately after the War Councilâ€|but it is one which may well secure our place in the galactic war."

Two vault doors slid open with a hiss of gas. Tarl's breath caught in his throat as he gazed at the chamber. A gigantic device sat at the far end of the dome-shaped room, taking up all of that side. It was a huge contraption of glowing panels, massive pipes, and cables. It looked kind of like three hourglasses melded into one another such that their centers connected, with each chamber being a mass of glass and metal. And at the center of these six chambers, at the midpoint connecting all of themâ€|was the core of the Quantum Manipulator. It seemed to glow even more brightly inside its new home.

Tarl stared at this massive device, dumbfounded. "Whatâ€|is this?"

"The device itself was under construction more than two years ago," the Empress explained. "Until now, I didn't think the core of the Quantum Manipulator would help this device. But when I came back from the War Council, I had been shown just how powerful the core really was, so I immediately had it inserted into the heart of the machine. And its capabilitiesâ€|increased exponentiallyâ€|" She walked forward towards the device. "This is a slipspace drive designed to be used on a battlefield, to curve the fabric of space-time with enough energy in the distortions to wipe out everything within fifteen kilometers. At least, that was its projected ability _without_ the core of the Quantum Manipulator. But with it, it can wipe out everything in _ten times_ that radius."

Tarl nodded. "And with the alliance, it will be even more dangerous, for the Purples will not suspect us until it is too late."

"Yes!" the Empress exclaimed. "The Purple Admiral is intent upon using us to his own purposes, just like he's done to everything else. But with this weapon, we can beat him to that betrayal. The treasures of Trevelyan shall be ours, and the Purples shall be beaten back before they can do anything to stop us."

20. Power Cores and Twilight Novels

20 â€" POWER CORES AND TWILIGHT NOVELS

A golden colored behemoth the size of a town, bathed in light from its recent slipspace jump, descended down upon the planet XBOXL1V. It was seven kilometers long and almost two wide, and had a hull painted in golden chrome (not real gold, but made to look like it). It was by far the largest mobile spacecraft in the Yellow Army Navy, the most capitol of capitol ships. Its name was the _Tyderion_, taken after one of Victarion Halcor's ancestors. And now, the leader of the Yellow Army, clad in his expansive suit of armor which seemed almost

a craft on its own, stared out the bridge window at the planet in front of him, his thoughts centered upon the hapless world.

Immediately after the War Council, Halcor had traveled up to this flagship, which had been waiting in SlipSpace for him. Too many things at the War Council had gone awry, throwing the galaxy (not to mention this particular planet, at the center of it all) into further chaos. Now, Halcor had decided it was time to bring order and authority to the situation. For the good of his own Army, the YGB Alliance had to stand, and Halcor was willing to subject the entire planet to martial law if that was what it took to repel the New Three from it, and secure the necessary resources for his own forces. He had not decided to initiate a planetary invasion just yet, but he suspected that the time for it was not far off. However, such actions were not to be taken lightly: he couldn't simply have the _Tyderion_ nuke the surface of the planet, because among other things, it would wipe out any tactical value the planet held, and the YGB Alliance already had too much of a foothold on the world. No, instead it would have to be a global insertion, with hundreds of thousands of troops on the ground.

He shook his helmet, for of course, such actions had not approached their time yet. There was yet one thing which could possibly avert the need for a global invasion, and the next few moments would likely determine the outcome of the planet below. The beeping of his tacpad informed him that the moment had arrived. It was Bradley, with the words "They are ready to speak." Halcor gazed for another moment out at the planet below. And then with no further hesitation, he swiftly turned and headed for the center of the ship.

The _Tyderion_ being as large as it was, the transport lifts took awhile to get people anywhere, and since Halcor was heading to a high-security sector of the ship, it took even longer. But after perhaps ten minutes of impatient waiting, he finally arrived at his destination. Beyond a keypad and an energy shield wall, the hallway doors slid open to reveal a whitely lit chamber. A team of scientists stood around with datapads, and at the center of the room sat a circular chamber containing a pile of very curious objects. Halcor came to stand next to Bradley, who (through his attentive salute) was observing the objects with curiosity.

"You should have brought them on board sooner," Halcor stated.

"They didn't like the shuttles we had to bring them on," said Bradley. "It took quite a bit of bargaining and coaxing to get them to leave the planet at all."

Halcor shook his helmet. "What're you talking about?" He pointed at the containment field in the room's middle section. "These devices are just machines. Resources for us. How, have you extracted the data from them yet or not?"

Bradley shrugged. "Well sir, we were really getting somewhere just before you came in. But now, they're not so talkative anymore."

Halcor gave a wide, confused shrug which took up much of the room (because of his armor). "Whatâ€¦|did you all go_ insane_ while stuck down there on that little planet? In just the last week, I've heard

numerous reports about fusion coils taking over basesâ€¦fusion coils leading the _Red Army_â€¦I might as well expect you to tell me fusion coils are hiding in my breakfast cereal!"

"_Naaaah, it's much too wet. A fusion coil would _never_ try to hide in breakfast cereal."_

Halcor actually looked startled, for perhaps the first time in his career. He whirled around, his armor nearly decapitating several scientists who happened to be standing near him. "What theâ€¦who said that?"

"I did, you twit. Are you on something?"

Halcor focused his gaze in the direction of the soundâ€¦coming from the containment field. He cautiously took several slow steps forward. The objects inside the field were mostly long dark-gray boxes which emitted small humming noises. But one of them looked like four melded together at a single glowing point. He studied the objects intently. So much trouble had gone into acquiring these thingsâ€¦and supposedly they held the power to change the galactic warâ€¦

"Hi, doofis. The _fuck_ are you staring at me like that for?"

Halcor started again, looking wildly at everyone else. "Itâ€¦itâ€¦" was all he could say. The sound had definitely come from the object right in front of him, the larger one. The voice had been almost toneless, like a really bad automated answering machine recording on a phone line. But it had been a voice.

"Dude, you're acting like you've never seen an energy storage device before. Don't we talk, in your civilization?"

Halcor narrowed his gaze back upon the object. "Well fuck meâ€¦"

"Ewww! That's gross, dude!" the object exclaimed.

"Umâ€¦hello?" Halcor tried.

"What, are you expecting me to wave or something? I don't have arms. And I've already said hi. Doofis."

Still standing near the edge of the room, Bradley decided to put in: "The large one is the leader. It calls itself the Energy Core. The others are Power Cores."

Halcor briefly looked back at him and nodded. "Ahâ€¦okay, then. So the Energy Core's the one that looks kind of like a tetrahedron, then?"

"_And you look ridiculous yourself, thank you very much,"_ said the Energy Core. "If a pointy continent and a semi truck had sexâ€¦yeah, that definitely appears to be how you came into this world."

"Is he always like this?" Halcor roared at Bradley.

Bradley nodded his helmet madly. "And it would hardly shut up on the way here."

Halcor turned back to the Energy Core and stared down at it as though it were something the dog had just left on the fancy new carpet. "These things better be worth it."

"Or else what, buddy?" the Energy Core shot back.

Bradley cleared his throat. "Y'know sir, I think we might be getting off on the wrong foot with these things. Maybe we should try a moreâ€¦politeâ€¦approach."

Halcor shrugged, and a golden surface half the size of the room shrugged with him. "Alright then, you try talking to it."

Bradley stepped forward. "Well I was before you bargedâ€¦" "I mean yes sir." He approached the containment field. "Hello again, Energy Core."

The Energy Core seemed to regard Bradley with a reduced err of derision. "Well you're slightly less annoying than Mr. Walking Continent over there. Right then, human: where're those texts you promised us?"

Bradley nodded. "Yes, the Twilight novels. Of course. I think it would be best if we took you to a library on ship and just show you aroundâ€¦"

Halcor was shaking his helmet madly. "You told them you'd let them read our texts? What's wrong with you? And _Twilight!_ Have you completely lost your senses?"

"_You promised us!_" the Energy Core protested. "I'm not telling you anything or giving you any energy unless or until we get our texts!"

Halcor started: "Do you want to die, you sorry little box?"

The Energy Core actually laughed, a completely monotone rhythm that sounded like an answering machine slowly dying by having its insides ripped out. "Kill even one of us, and there will be so much energy released that this entire ship will be vaporized at a subatomic level. You guys won't even have _atoms_ anymore. Hahahaha! Try again, you towering moron! You won't harm any of us. You can't."

Halcor growled like an angry lion. He paced around the room for several moments in a fury, causing the nearby scientists to scurry out of the way like terrified rats to avoid being knocked over by his armor's bulkyness. Finally, Halcor came to stand again in front of the containment field. "Fine, have your texts." To the scientists, he shouted: "One of you, go get the first novel in the Twilight series. And be goddamn quick about it!"

Several minutes later, a soldier returned holding a paperback book with lots of blue and purple colors on its cover. Halcor grabbed the tome out of the scientist's hand and forced it through the containment field. "Here you are. Enjoy it, and that's not a request."

Once it had left Halcor's gauntlet, the book simply levitated in midair, its first few pages flipping across every thirty seconds or so. Once he had read maybe fifteen pages into the story, the Energy

Core suddenly slammed the book shut and shouted: "What the hell is this crap? This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen! Better than Shakespeare? I call bullshit!" The book sailed back through the containment field like a soccer ball, impacting Halcor's armor plating and simply flattening upon it, falling to the floor in a mound of squished paper. "Find me something else!" the Energy Core demanded.

Bradley shook his helmet. "You specifically asked for Twilight, and we gave you Twilight. Now uphold your end of the bargain, and tell us where we can find this 'even larger community' of you."

"_You told me it was better than Shakespeare,"_ the Energy Core stated.

Bradley crossed his arms. "I can't control your opinion of things."

The Energy Core sighed. "True enough. Tell you what: give me and my people access to the library on this ship, and I will give you the information you seek, and then maybe consider liberating some of our energy for you."

Halcor grumbled.

"It's either that, or we all just sit here in this containment field and stare crossly at youâ€|and you will not stop us! We can see through all our sides."

Halcor shook his helmet in frustration. "Fine, whatever. You can see the library, I don't honestly care. Now: tell me what I want to know."

"I have your word, human?"

"_Yes!_"_

The Energy Core sighed again. "Fine, fine, I'll tell you what you want to know."

Every Yellow in the room gathered around, and closer, to the containment field.

The Energy Core explained: "There is another, much larger, community of my species located upon this world. Now, I wouldn't normally even consider allowing the enslavement of so many of my own kind, but those guys down thereâ€|they're a bunch of assholes, so fuck them. Anyways, this community is situated underground beneath the center of the Trevelyan Fields."

"Heh," exhaled Halcor. "Trevelyan. Really? Well, it looks like that old Blue warlord had more than he thoughtâ€|and never realized it! He had a giant city right over it, and no idea what was beneath. Ha!"

"Someone built a city over the location with no knowledge of the community?" the Energy Core asked.

Bradley nodded. "One of the largest base complexes ever to exist on this world. But then it was wiped out. Johannes Trevelyan never knew

what was really in his possession."

"You humansâ€|" the Energy Core exclaimed derisively.

"Patton," Halcor addressed Bradley proudly, slapping the station commander on the shoulder plate. "It's time to deploy the ground forces. It seems a full planetary invasion won't be necessary, but we will take Trevelyan Fields. I want that entire stretch of land secure, all thirty thousand square kilometers of it. _And then I want those power cores._" He pointed briefly at the containment field. "Get the exact coordinates from that Energy Core, and then have all of our forces within a thousand kilometers of the destination be called to duty. Yes, this is our moment, Patton! This is the moment when the Yellow Army becomes the supreme power of the entire galaxy. Once we have that source of power lying under Trevelyan, then the galactic war will be ours."

21. War Never Sleeps

21 â€" WAR NEVER SLEEPS

Shadows were beginning to inch along the ground when Skope emerged from Green Base to take a breath of outside air. To his delight, he saw Amber on the other side of the canyon, standing atop the bunker which served as the entrance structure to Yellow Base. He waved over to her. She saw, returning the motion. At that, Skope swiftly jogged over to her location. He was lightly panting when he covered the last stair steps to the rooftop of the bunker.

"Skope!" said Amber.

The two of them embraced lightly. "It feels like ages since we've seen each other," said Skope.

Amber nodded. "Only about three days. But yeah, I know what you mean." They both looked out at the canyon for some moments, basking in one another's presence as well as the scenic view of the canyon. It had always been a wonderful sight, though this was hampered somewhat by the gigantic bomb near Green Base, the awfully stupid sounds being blasted across the canyon by the movie it was being forced to watch, as well as a great swirling vortex above the western canyon wall, which had only been growing larger and more menacing since it had come into existence five days earlier. But nonetheless, the canyon was still largely wilderness, and its sights served to remove one's mind from the everyday perils of the galactic war machine. As Amber and Skope admired their surroundings, Amber spotted a series of figures making their way slowly towards Green Base from a Pelican which had just dropped them off on the canyon floor. There were six of them, a full squad, and they all had green colored armor on: they appeared to be from the containment installation atop the western canyon wall, which was in charge of watching the vortex. She indicated the sight to Skope.

Skope took a look through his own sniper scope for a moment. "Huh. I wonder what that's about. If it's something about the vortexâ€|then it can't be good. That thing's only been getting bigger and bigger." The two of them looked at each other, then headed down the stairs to the ground and jogged together across the grass to Green Base.

When they got there, they found the squad of Greens at the door to the elevator shaft at the back of the base entrance structure. The squad leader was standing in front of the control panel, speaking into its transceiver. "Um, yes. This is concerning the, um, the movie that your, giant bomb, is watching. Yes, I know that it is the worst move ever made. My men and I are all very well acquainted with that fact. That's the reason why we've come to talk to you, actually." He took a breath, preparing to get to the important stuff. "You see, the audio of that movie is perhaps the worst audio that anyone at the Vortex Containment Base has ever heard, and they have to listen to it over and over and over again because it's on a loop. I have soldiers stationed outside on every shift, on the cliff overlooking this canyon, and they have had to resort to earplugs for the last two days to tune out the awful lines and acting voices from that damned movie. The long and short of it is: we need you to turn it off. The audio from it is interfering with the performance of my men, and I cannot allow that."

The voice coming from the speaker sounded like Nome's, but Skope and Amber were too far away to overhear what the medic was saying to the squad. Amber whispered to Skope an inquiry that maybe they should introduce themselves to the squad and try to be of help, but Skope insisted that he wanted the squad's conversation with Nome to play itself out first. And indeed, it did.

The squad leader tilted the side of his helmet towards the transceiver, nodding after every few moments. "Uh-huh, I see. Well, that does complicate things a bit, doesn't it? So, you mean to tell me that the bomb will go radioactive and eventually explode if it stops watching the movie?" He listened, nodding some more. Then he continued: "Well then, why don't you have it airlifted somewhere else? What do you mean, a Pelican can't lift it? Of course it can't. Oh. Yeah, maybe not a kiloton of weight. You'd need a frigate to lift that much. I see your problem. So then, this bomb is just sitting active in front of your base, and there's nothing you can do about it? Wait, what're you, what do you mean 'it knows things?' It's a bomb. How can it know anything? Oh, an artificial intelligence is inside the bomb. I see. But how does that help anything." He then lifted both his arms, as an indication of extreme annoyance. "Well what good does it do to have a conversation with a bomb? How does that help us to be able to turn off the movie? That's what we're trying to do, remember? Yes, um, Nome, I can understand it's a difficult situation. Believe me, I know. Ah, contact the Acting Grand General. Are you serious? What would the Acting Grand General be able to do about this?" At Nome's response, he raised his arms again, much higher than the first time. He almost looked like he was conducting a symphony, albeit a very chaotic one. "_What?_ Why, why would you want to take an active nuclear device into Centerpoint City? Study it? You want to study the damn thing? But I thought you said you were a medic. Now you're saying you're a scientist. Oh wait, you used to be a scientist. Oh, sure. But you want me to do all the work, contacting the Grand General himself to get it airlifted into the capitol of the Green Army. Yeah no shit, Sherlock, that is awfully wishful thinking, isn't it?" He turned back to his men. "This guy's a piece of work. He says he the Nome who fought in the Battle of Centerpoint City and is a member of Lime Squadron." He shook his helmet. But no sooner had he finished deriding the medic, when suddenly he got a message from his tacpad. He stared at it in disbelief for a second. "Oh shit. Oh, fuck. The medic guy, he just sent me a confirmation signature. He really is the Nome who fought

in Centerpoint City!" He slapped his helmet. "Ohmygod." He reactivated the transceiver on the door. "Uh, Nome, dudeâ€¦I'm real sorry about that. I had no idea. I thought you were bullshitting me. Yeah, uh, I'll get on contacting the Acting Grand General. Yeah, sure thing. Bye." He hung up. Then he slapped his helmet again. "Ugh, what a day!" he exclaimed. Talking amongst themselves, the squad then made their way down the ramp and back toward their waiting Pelican. They passed right by Skope and Amber, but didn't notice either of them, too preoccupied with their own thoughts as they were.

"Well that sounded interesting," said Skope as he and Amber watched the Pelican take off.

"Do you want to go in and make sure everything's okay?" Amber asked.

Skope shook his helmet. "Nah. Everything is. Those guys were just complaining about the movie audio." He shrugged. "But who knows. Maybe they'll actually do something about it."

"Maybe," said Amber. With nothing better to do, the two of them walked up the ramps of the Green Base entrance structure, ending up on its highest level. And then they continued doing what they had been before: enjoying being with each other and watching the sights of the canyon as it settled into evening. In the midst of galactic war, moments of true tranquility like this came unpredictably, and were usually few and far between. They figured that they had to savor every instant of the experience while it lasted. They were more right than they could possibly have known.

* * *

><p>It was precisely five in the afternoon when the message came. It was just the moment when Lemon had seemingly run out of lemonade, having totally exhausted the base's supply of it over the last several days. Maybe it was just as well. Lemon Squadron was sitting around the kitchen table, wondering what in the heck they were going to do with no more lemonade. And then without warning, everyone's tacpads started beeping at exactly the same time. Seconds later, Ryan and Clair radioed in. Everyone in the base was getting a COM signal.<p>

Wren did a little researching on her tacpad. "Huh. Hey, guys."

"Yeah," Hearts asked.

"This message isn't just being sent out to our base," said Wren. "It's being sent out to every single Yellow soldier within a_ very _large radius."

"By who?" Tom asked.

"Supreme Lord Commander General Victarion Halcor," Wren replied. "Whatever this is about, it must be absolutely huge."

Clair was deep into reading through the message, doing so aloud. "Every Yellow soldier within the designated radius is to immediately relocate to Trevelyan Fields for battle assignment. All soldiers must be at the Fields by 0600 hours Galactic Timeâ€¦the date is for

tomorrow morning. Bossâ€¦I think our Army is about to initiate a siege of Trevelyan."

Patton was staring at his tacpad with just as much focus as Clair was hers. "Now, just what in the hellâ€¦why _Trevelyan_? There's nothing there. It's just a huge stretch of prairie. It has no tactical value. What exactly does Halcor think he's doing? I have a sneaking suspicion that the events at the War Council have something to do with this. I just don't know exactly how it relatesâ€¦" He then looked up and straightened his posture. "I think a talk with my brother is in order. Maybe he can shed light on just what the fuck is going on here." He strode out the door with broad stride, his arms held at his sides.

The group followed him along the path towards the communication's room. Midway along the route to it, they ran into Amber, who had just come in from the canyon entrance. "Lieutenant Sinclair," said Hester. "We were wondering when you'd show up. Doing some scouting in the canyon, yes?"

Amber stopped midstride, paused for a second, then nodded. "Hey um, I just got a COM on my tacpad, but I haven't had a chance to read it yet. By the way, is something going on? Why are you all in a line? Boss?" Patton's only response was a motion for her to follow the group. She did so, and everyone pressed on towards the communications room. Amber actually bothered to read the message as they walked. "Mobilization at Trevelyan? Has Halcor lost hisâ€¦"l" She caught herself. "I mean, Halcor seems to have a very unusual plan in mind."

"You can be frank, Stone," said Patton. "We're all wondering exactly the same thing, I guarantee you."

The group finally made it to the com room. The door had barely finished sliding open when the whole group barged through it. Clair was the first to the console. She tapped a few keys to set up the connection, then had Patton input a security code. Then they all waited for several moments while Bradley's own tacpad rang. And then Bradley's helmet appeared before them in full hologram, towering above them. Bradley was sitting at some very fancy desk, though the surroundings were unfamiliar: he definitely was not on Yellow Command, for the lighting was different, with more of a golden hue instead of pure white. And also, the corridors around him were made from an entirely different material: some kind of durable plastic instead of raw steel. Bradley had clearly put the view of Yellow Team up on a screen, because he was staring straight at them instead of down, and just below his face was a brilliantly polished desktop. The station commander looked towards the screen as though he was having slight trouble holding his head up. He was nearly slumped over in his chair, with both his arms spread out upon the desk, and a giant mug of coffee sat steaming next to them. "Bro," he said slowly and faintly.

"Bro," Patton greeted. "You look like shit."

Bradley gave a single snort of laughter. "Yeah, I probably do. I've been having a hell of a day." He shifted a bit, very slowly. "You're all, uh, wondering about the siege then, yes?"

"Yup," said Patton. "Ever since the War Council, Halcor's strategies

have seemed rather interesting, to say the least, and this tops it all."

Bradley nodded understandingly. "Indeed they have."

"So what's going on, then?"

Bradley shrugged. "What it looks like. We're taking Trevelyan. All of it, the whole region."

"Why?"

Bradley shifted again, then looked hesitantly at the screen, with a slightly regretful look in his visor. "It's classified."

Patton crossed his arms. "Are you fucking serious?"

"I can't tell you anything. I'm sorry."

Ryan stepped forward, perhaps against the wishes of Lemon, and began addressing Bradley very frankly, though his questions were everyone else's as well. "So wait just a minute. Trevelyan is being flooded with over a hundred thousand of our soldiers—one of the largest sieges in the recent past on this planet, and you can't tell us why we're doing it?"

Bradley nodded.

Patton snorted in frustration. "Politics of some kind are responsible, aren't they?"

Again, Bradley nodded.

"I fucking hate politics." Patton knew that something huge was going on, and not just at Trevelyan. Ever since the War of Six Armies had begun, the Yellow Army's highest echelons had been devising a campaign of secrecy. Many of the officers at Yellow Command, Bradley included, had been off on "classified" missions in recent days. Additionally, the Empress of the Orange Army had nearly forced something out of Halcor at the War Council, something he would probably have killed to keep quiet if it had come to that. The hierarchy of the Yellow Army was hiding something, something that could only be huge. And Patton didn't like it, not one tiny bit: especially not when it forced his own brother to start keeping secrets from him.

Patton leaned closer to the transceiver. "Bro, listen to me. I realize that your hands are tied. For whatever reason, you simply can't tell us what this whole thing is really about. The thing is: something smells about this. It stinks. There's way too much secrecy and behind-the-scenes maneuvering going on, and too little actual trust anymore. Bro, I need to know: is this operation actually in the best interests of the Yellow Army?"

Bradley hesitated, then nodded weakly.

Patton interpreted that as a yes, though a very close one. "I see."

Now it was Bradley's turn to speak, and this time he looked directly

at the screen with a focus that even Hester found difficult to match. "You're right, bro. Right about everything. Things are changing, and not for the better. Ever since this War of Six Armies startedâ€¦I dunno, it's like something's taken over command of this Army. It's just not the same: there's no honor anymore, no pride or values that lead decisions. No one in high command seems to care about peace anymore, certainly not Halcor. They don't want to bring things to a resolution. Now, it's just about winning, via whatever number of lives it takes. This war is changing us, bro, and I don't like what it's turning us into." He cleared his throat. "About Trevelyan, I can tell you this much: it's big. _Real_ big. Game changer of the galaxy big. And we aren't the only Army involved. You, bro: you and Lemon and your whole team need to be careful. I've been trying not to think about it. But when multiple Armies want something this badâ€¦" He shook his helmet. "I can't help the feeling that lots of people are about to die. Just be careful."

Patton's arms had fallen to his sides while he listened. In addition, the rest of the room was staring at the hologram in near disbelief. The only response Patton could think of was: "Well, I guess we'll all be at Trevelyan then. I justâ€¦I just hope that Halcor knows what the hell he's doing."

Bradley nodded. "So do I." The transmission ended.

As things went dark again, Ryan blurted out: "Ohmygod! This does not sound good at all!"

"I know," said Amber. "What the hell is at Trevelyan anyways? A 'galactic game changer'. And something which Halcor thinks is worth so much that he doesn't even care about the cost on lives."

Hearts shrugged. "Quite honestly guys, it sounds like everything has gone to shit, as far as the decision makers of our Army are concerned. Command only cares about winning: no honor, no pride. Those were Bradley's own words. And damn, I've known him to be frank, but _never_ like this."

"Boss?" Clair asked, an edge of fear in her voice. "What do we do now?"

Patton was in silence for a good while. Finally, he said: "The only thing we can."

Hester elaborated: "We follow orders, of course. We go to Trevelyan, just like everyone else. We kill any other Armies that happen to be there. And then we secure whatever it is at Trevelyan which is so damn important."

Patton thought to himself a moment longer, then nodded. "Everyone, start packing, and do it now. We don't have much time. 0600 hours GT, that's when we have to be at Trevelyan. That's just twelve and a half hours away, and we'll have to travel almost a thousand kilometers by air transport. So get ready, get rest, and then prepare for battle. We leave at 0300. Now move!"

22. Trevelyan Fields

22 â€" TREVELYAN FIELDS

A sea of gold stretched out before the Yellows. An endless stretch of prairie, bathed in the morning sunlight. For an impending battlefield, it was surprisingly beautiful. Ryan immediately began taking pictures with his laptop's camera, but Patton ordered him to put it away just as fast, afterwards enquiring as to exactly why he had decided to bring it along with him to a huge military siege.

After their conversation with Bradley, the Yellows had slept until very early morning hours, then hopped into a Pelican which had been sent for them, and flown on it to Trevelyan Fields. Not everyone was sure if they were rested. Lemon didn't seem to be having much of a problem in this regard, having been rigorously trained to not rely on sleep to stay focused. But Ryan and Clair were frequently yawning, and Brian kept dozing off every fifteen minutes, sinking out of his seat and onto the floor, waking himself up with each impact. Hopefully coffee would come to their rescue. Amber was also yawning, but not nearly as frequently. She would probably be fine, Patton decided, with 'probably' being the best estimation possible during military sieges.

The plains rolled by for a few minutes, until the Pelican eventually came upon its destination: a town of roughly two dozen Firebases, each fully upgraded with support structures, which rested just below the horizon. It was packed with Yellow soldiers, thousands of them, along with numerous vehicles that ranged in size from the small getaway vehicles called Mongooses, to mobile command bases called Elephants, which managed to dwarf even the Scorpion Tanks next to them. The Yellow's Pelican set them down right outside a Firebase near the center of the encampment. The pilot informed them that they needed to report to the Colonel directing that particular Firebase, and that he would brief them on their missions. The Yellows obliged, stepping out of the Pelican as a group and making their way towards the Firebase through the throngs of marching platoons and vehicles. The encampment was arranged in such a way that there were wide streets between each group of four Firebases, and these were more crowded with people than the district of Centerpoint City. As they finally reached their designated Firebase, they all had to lean to the side of its entranceway, for an endless stream of newly built vehicles was pouring out of it nonstop. It was a slow go down the end of the long ramp leading into the actual base. Then it was through the machine room, and into the command room. From the inside, the Firebase looked absolutely identical to the Firebase they had entered at Centerpoint City during the Purple invasion of it. This was expected: Firebases were a universal technology used by all Armies, with internal space constraints leaving none-too-many options for design schematics. As such, each Firebase, regardless of the Army that owned it, was very similar to those of other Armies (the only real exception to this being the Purples, who now relied so much on ancient alien technology they had uncovered, that they actually used an entirely different structure for a command base).

As the Yellows filed into the command room, a voice rang out among the busy officers: "Ah, the famous Lemon Squadron!"

"Oh please no," Patton muttered under his breath as the group refocused their attention towards one side of the room.

A Yellow soldier with the badge of a Colonel was striding

energetically over to them. Suddenly, everyone in Lemon had a look of annoyance. Hearts was the first to say anything to the Colonel. "Pete Oles. Been a while, hasn't it?"

"You guys know each other?" Amber asked.

Wren nodded, then whispered to her: "If there was someone in the entire Yellow Army that Hearts had not met with, I'd be surprised. But yes, he does know him, and so do all of us in Lemon. Though we kind of wish we didn't."

The Colonel had reached the group. He held a gauntlet out to Hearts, and the two shook hands. "I've been so looking forward to meeting all of you again," he said quickly. "I've been following all your missions on YellowTube. You guys are as awesome as ever!"

Hearts briefly glanced at Hester and the rest of Lemon. "Iâ€|uh, I was unaware our missions were being posted on the internet."

Oles nodded. "That's because I've been posting them! To show everyone else what you guys have been doing."

"Is thatâ€|legal?" Hester asked.

Oles nodded again. "Oh, don't worry. Though I myself have access to a considerable amount of operation information, having just attained the rank of Colonelâ€|" He nodded proudly at himself for a moment. "â€|On YellowTube I've taken care to leave all confidential things out of the videos."

"So that's whatâ€|pretty much all you could put into a video about us, I should think," said Tom.

Oles nodded. "Uuuh, well, I think you'd be surprised. As long as I keep out each mission's location, objectives, combat-related eventsâ€|uhâ€|I should mention that each video isn't normally very long, by any stretch of the imagination, but it has enough to keep the viewers subscribing, if you know what I meanâ€|" He chuckled awkwardly.

Clair whispered in Patton's ear: "Boss, what is this guy's problem?"

"He's obsessed with us, Lemon Squadron," Patton replied in a similar whisper. "About three years ago, when we were on a mission at some orbital station, we got stuck with this guyâ€|"a civilian at the timeâ€|"who got ecstatic over having met The Famous Lemon Squadron. He wouldn't shut up the whole time, and we had to save his ass probably a dozen times during that op. He is the only person I've ever met who can probably rival Brian in terms of being an annoying little shit. Anyways, after the mission was finally over, he said that he had been 'inspired' by us to join the Yellow Army Military. Apparently he did, and through some God-awful screw up he has ended up as a Colonel in charge of a Firebase."

Clair nodded. "I see. You're very right, boss: he probably is almost as annoying as Brian."

Oles was still talking, going on about how he had surpassed the YellowNet in terms of providing information about Lemon Squadron.

Hearts had a very restrained posture, as though he was always a hair away from slapping the helmet off the guy, but somehow managing not to do so. Finally Hearts blurted out: "Okay Pete, this is all very awesome and all, but can we please get our briefing?"

Oles perked up more than he already had. "Oh, right! Of course, I almost forgot. It's actually quite simple: you're going to the front lines. Not just Lemon, but everyoneâ€|else." He gestured at Ryan.

The instant Oles had completed the upload of orders to Lemon's HUDs, the group stormed out of the Firebase with no second thoughts, leaving Oles in mid-sentence. "Was he a former Blue also?" Amber asked.

"He makes you wonder, doesn't he?" said Wren.

The group got into a set of Warthogs and sped off for their assigned coordinates. It wasn't until they had cleared the Firebase that they all collectively realized that they had never bothered to ask Oles what they were heading to the front lines to fight _against._ However, they got their answer soon enough. As they took their place amidst a field of thousands of other Yellow soldiers in vehicles, they looked across the endless plains and saw other masses of troops staring back at them. On one side of the horizon were very odd looking indigo colored vehicles, with curved surfaces and colored glowing lights. They were immediately recognized as the same types of vehicles which had invaded Centerpoint City. Yet these were not alone, for on the other end of the horizon sat legions of orange colored soldiers holding weaponry which seemed to float in their hands, curious devices which appeared to assemble themselves as the Oranges summoned them for wielding. It was at this moment that the Yellows came to realize exactly why so many soldiers had been summoned to this place to fight: Trevelyan Fields was already owned by an alliance of the Purple and Orange Armies, and they would be damned if they surrendered it.

* * *

><p>The bridge of the Tyderion was packed with officers as Victarion Halcor stared down at the huge grassy battlefield below, through a screen of fine pixels. Three of the Lord High Commander Generals of the Yellow Army, including Bradley Patton, stood at Halcor's side. There was a great silence in the room, like nature's deep breath before a coming storm. Halcor stepped forward towards the screen. "Hail them. Do it now."

The response was quicker than he expected. Within just a few seconds, a pair of three dimensional holograms appeared just in front of the tactical screen. One figure had purple armor and decorative metal bands around the waist. The other was clad in reflective orange. "Greetings, Victarion Halcor," said the Purple.

Halcor recognized the Purple very quickly. "Yoren Stendaar, the Admiral's great explorer. Encroaching upon another remote planet, are you? I don't think you'll find this one so easy to take, Purple."

Stendaar shrugged. "Really? Trevelyan has already been claimed. Just look at your tactical view. The Purple and Orange Armies cover these

fields."

"And fighting together, you will never repel us," said another voice. Halcor turned to see the Orange figure, his hologram proudly tall. He did not immediately recognize this individual, though of course he had very little memory of any members of the Orange Army, since its supposed destruction near the very start of the initial galactic war. Perhaps anticipating Halcor's questions, the Orange stated: "I am Solienne Tarl, the Right Hand of the Empress. The Purple Army and mine are engaged in a temporary truce, for the duration of any battles that take place here. We anticipated your invasion, you see, and decided that the best way of defending against you was to band together for the time being."

Halcor crossed his arms. "You're intending on splitting the treasures of this region evenly between your Armies, is that it?" He looked back at Stendaar. "The _Purple Army_ sharing with others. I never thought I'd see the dayâ€|"

"Alliances are often necessary," said Stendaar. "As I am sure you have learned quite well, in recent events. Though I am inclined to wonder: where are your Green and Blue friends now? I hear rumors of thisâ€|YGB Alliance. Yet I see before me, a Yellow leader, and a Yellow Army, standing all alone, with no one to fight beside them. Have events at a certainâ€|War Councilâ€|caused them to forsake you?"

At that, Tarl could not help letting out a slight chuckle.

Yet Halcor's exclamation was a grunt. "I know your Empress tried to derail everything," he shouted at Tarl. "But it doesn't matter now. I don't need them."

Stendaar shrugged nonchalantly. "Then I suppose you have hailed both of us to inform us of your decision to surrender Trevelyan Fields."

Halcor just stood on the spot for a moment. Then he leaned back his massive helmet and laughed. "You are a dreamer, Stendaar! How could you possibly think of standing against me, let alone that I wouldâ€|_surrender_? I have a hundred thousand men ready and waiting, more than both of your forces combined. It is both of you whom should be surrendering!"

Tarl leaned forward. "Haclorâ€|if our Armies should fight, it will be a bloodbath. Surely, you must realize this."

Halcor shrugged. "War is war, and war is hell. In any case, it will be on both of your hands if things should go terribly. You see, ifâ€|no, _when_â€|I decide to attack, I will not be the murderer. No, instead I will be simply taking what's mine. You both act as though you knew that the Yellow Army would come here. And if that is the case, then the fault is _yours,_ for placing your own men in my Army's path. I hereby claim Trevelyan Fields to be under the ownership of the Yellow Army. There will be no surrender on my partâ€|" He suddenly noticed that Bradley was staring at him from his side, with an almost pleading expression. Nevertheless, he continued: "If both of you do not surrender now, then this invasion will take place, and all blood will be your responsibility."

"Your morals are twisted, Yellow," said Tarl. "Who else is responsible for the death of a stabbing, if not the bearer of the blade? It matters not how the victim entered the picture."

"I have made my decision," said Halcor. "And I have no need to consider how the 'victim entered the picture. The only thing that matters is the end result. Dead will be dead, and the Yellow Army will have its territory. Now, will you surrenderâ€|or won't you?"

Tarl sneered. "Perhaps you will have a different viewâ€|once your Army plays the part of the victim."

Both figures flashed out of existence, and the lights of the projection consoles slowly died.

Halcor took a deep breath. "And so it beginsâ€|"

"Sir?" said a voice. It was Bradley, still standing ever diligently beside him. "Are you sure about this?"

Halcor's response was "Tell me: what is the measure of a loyal soldier?"

Bradley paused before replying, dreading the answer: "Never question the will of the Yellow Army."

"And what is the will of the Yellow Army?"

"Your will, Supreme Lord Commander General."

"Yesâ€|exactly." Halcor placed his gauntlets together. "And now, we shall initiate battle in the name of justice and glory, as the Yellow Army was always meant to act." He turned to the several officers at the ring of consoles near the bridge windows. "Commanders: initiate the siege." There were solemn nods as orders were sent.

And then it began.

* * *

><p>The silence on the battlefield was clear and pristine. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers simply stood, staring at each other from across miles. Hearts heard snoring from behind him, and he looked to find Brian slumped over the chaingun turret, sawing logs just as he had been doing the whole morning. When the Yellows had left the town of firebases, Brian had somehow ended up as gunner on his respective vehicle. He had likely just taken a quick spot where he could, not understanding that he had just volunteered himself to actually use the weapon when necessary. Hearts reached over to the former Blue and nudged him hardly. Brian stirred, then went right back to sleep, not even having been roused from whatever dream he was having. "Muffinsâ€|" he kept mumbling. "Your flour is endlessâ€|" Hearts nudged him more strongly. He finally started. "Whoaâ€|whataâ€|"<p>

"You're on the front lines of an imminent battle," Hearts stated tersely. "Be alert!"

"I am?" Brian asked. And then: "Ooooh yeahhhâ€|"

Hearts heard muttering from the Warthog next to his, and saw Patton, its driver, exchanging money with Ryan, its passenger. From the chatter he could pick up (they were off radio at the moment) they were placing bets on how long Brian would survive in the battle. Patton had guessed about five minutes, while Ryan had been much for faithful in Brian, putting his life expectancy all the way to fifteen minutes. Inez the gunner stood behind both of them, gently shaking her helmet at the scene.

And then everyone's COM tactical display, inside their visors, began to activate at once.

Everyone stopped what they were doing, putting their dominant hands to their visors as a reflex. Patton and Ryan put away what money they had out. Brian suddenly stood diligently upright, for the first time that day. And all around them, a hundred thousand Yellow soldiers stood at attention. Though there were a multitude of different vectors given for the command, the command itself was the same for damn near everyone: ATTACK. Across the field, the Orange and Purple soldiers were all doing the same. The battle lines shifted like an uneasy creature. Then came the wind. No, not wind: a battle cry. A huge battle cry, from across the plains, and two great masses moving like a terrible storm—closer. Memories of Centerpoint City flashed through the minds of Lemon Squadron and Yellow Team. Then they, leading the front lines, rushed forwards.

And all became chaos.

23. State of Chaos

23 " STATE OF CHAOS

Like hoards from a dark myth, they came: the oddly shaped but speedy Ghosts, and the monstrous Wraiths, and the mysterious Banshees flying above them, all protected by transparent blue domes of energy shields. Yet these were not alone, for the Purples also used more traditional vehicles, such as Warthogs of all types, as well as Scorpion Class Battle Tanks. Yet this was far from the extent of the force: for the Purples were soon accompanied by just as great a number of Oranges. They drove human vehicles, but the weapons they bared were just as terrible as the alien vehicles of the Purples.

The Yellow's Warthogs were following the path of the front lines, where bodies were piling up in disturbing amounts. Dome shields disappeared and became explosions. Squads of Yellow soldiers went up in flames which matched their Army color. And Oranges were somehow causing the Yellow soldiers to disappear into thin air, seeming to vaporize them into tiny glowing particles which ate up both vehicles and bodies with ruthless abandon.

A golden streak of light appeared just beyond the side of Wren's helmet. She looked around wildly, people of several colors whizzing past her as Hearts drove the Warthog. "Where did that come from?" The bolt came again, this time way off to the left of the Warthog, and Wren was able to follow it, finding an Orange foot soldier looking towards her as she passed. The Orange was holding a long-barreled metallic weapon of some kind, though it looked nothing like any

weapon she had ever seen, even of the Purple's alien tech. The Orange raised his weapon again, trying to keep up with Hearts' Warthog as it passed, and Wren realized that the weapon wasn't just one object: it was actually many smaller objects, held together by some invisible force field. He was about to fire it again, but the Yellow's Warthog swerved, giving Brian a view of the Orange. Maybe it was just instinct from having a weapon pointed at him, but Brian showed surprising efficiency, mowing down the Orange before he had a chance to do anything more.

Hearts righted the vector of the vehicle, heading for the three-way mess where the front lines of all three Armies were colliding into each other. A giant pile of vehicles towered above the fray, and even as the Yellows watched, men continued to drive up it, annihilating each other from across the mound with unrelenting fury. Vehicles and bodies were everywhere. "It's Centepoint City all over again," said a nervous voice through Hearts' COM. It was Ryan, and he sounded very nervous.

Normally, Hearts would have said some comforting words to a friend. But in this case, he actually didn't know what to say, especially with Bradley's words still on mind. But fortunately, Patton beat him to the task of addressing Ryan: "Hobar, seeing as you're a weapons specialist, I really don't understand why you're not completely enjoying a situation like this. This is what being a weapons specialist is all about. Now, do you need me to use your specialized weapons for you, or can you take care of that?"

"Are you saying that Centerpoint City was fun for you?"

That counter figuratively caught Patton right between the eyes. "Iâ€|umâ€|_Hobar_â€|war is war, and war is hell. Get used to it. You are not living the life of Sally Buttercup of Little Tree Forest. You're in a warzone. So act like it."

Ryan seemed to be strengthening his resolve as the chaos of things washed over him. "Yeah, uh, rightâ€|boss. Not sure what came over me." He released a rocket at an oncoming Purple Warthog, which exploded in great fury.

"Excellent job, Hobar!" Patton shouted. "Do that a few dozen more times, I might start getting fond of you."

"On it, boss."

That was the moment when their COMs all pinged with a caller outside of their team. "Hello again, guys! It's started. This will be so exciting."

Hester barked: "Oles, what're you doing on our COM channel?" _And how in the hell did Command let you become a Colonel?_

Pete Oles responded instantaneously: "I'm your mission overseer for the duration of this battle. I'm looking at a tactical overlay of the battlefield right now, and I'll be giving you all helpful instructions, as well as objectives."

Half of the Yellows rolled their visors. "Oh please no," Wren muttered under her breath.

He's going to be our objective dispenser, Hearts thought to himself. _Just fucking perfect. Althoughâ€|we don't actually know our objectives right nowâ€|do we? Courtesy of Halcor and his recent classification campaign. How come Oles has been briefed on what this battle is about, but not my team? Nothing is right about this!_

"I have your first instructions," said Oles with childlike enthusiasm. "Do you all see that gigantic pile of ruined vehicles in front of you?"

"You mean that insanely huge pile of wreckage we've been steadily driving towards for the last few minutes?" Patton retorted, showing through his voice his displeasure at the given structure of command. "Yes, _Colonel,_ I see it."

"Okay. Good! Now take an immediate right."

"We're heading _away_ from the battlefield?" Clair asked into her mike.

"Oh waitâ€|hang on!" said Oles on the other end. "This is my left, this is my rightâ€|okay, that makes more sense. Yeah um, take a _left_ at the giant mound."

"_Is he a joke?_" Deryn muttered under her breath as the group made a u-turn. Legions of Yellows, Oranges, and Purples in varying vehicles surrounded the mound. Yellow Team drove through the chaos as nonchalantly and quickly as possible. Nearly everyone was so focused on the task at hand that they failed to notice four Warthogs speedily slinking by. Skirting around the mound, they came upon a contingent of Yellow vehicles firing upon several Orange Warthogs. The Oranges looked to be completely outnumbered, and Ryan was about to cheer the Yellows on.

But then one of the Orange Warthogs turned to give the Yellow soldiers its side face. The Orange in the passenger seat was holding a very large metallic weapon of angular design, the likes of which no Yellow had seen before. When it fired, it shot out five spherical orbs, which glowed like a bonfire. The projectiles clustered together, individually oscillating back and forth as the group as a whole traveled in a line, heading directly for the mass of Yellow vehicles. Watching the motion of the released energy, Hester silently mouthed _what in the hell,_ while Inez and Ryan watched with curious fascination. Ahead of Lemon, the mass of Yellow soldiers were attempting to scurry their vehicles out of the way of the incoming orbs. But the shifting forms of energy came too quickly, impacting the dead center of the group. From then on, it was a slaughter.

At impact, the five orbs suddenly unbound from each other, scattering in all directions and spreading destruction to everything they touched. There was a great electronic roar, like a thunderstorm heard over a radio. Surfaces of vehicles simply vanished into a breeze of glowing dust which floated in the breeze. And then the orbs came in contact with people. Even by Lemon's experience, it was horrible to watch. Those unfortunate enough to be touched by the projectiles simply disintegrated into the same glowing dust. Soldiers fell out of their vehicles screaming, while watching their legs turn into a brilliant ash which climbed quickly up their bodies, and they writhed on the ground until eventually there was nothing left. The dust from the destruction looked like a sky of stars as it wafted up into the

smoky air, before finally fading out altogether.

As the surviving Yellows fled, they left behind a pile of bodiless armor and a series of vehicles with their front or back halves missing. Lemon and Yellow Team were still watching open-mouthed, when the Orange fired off another shot at the other fleeing Yellows. "Inez!" Hester shouted.

Without further hesitation, Inez whipped out her railgun (one of the experimental prototypes from Yellow Command) and sent a charged shot at the Orange. The Orange's body exploded like a fruit of the same name that was hit was a baseball bat. The vehicle he had been in nearly tipped over from the sudden change in momentum, but its driver instantly hit the gas, and the enemy Warthog did somewhat of a wheelie as it turned around and made for Yellow Team. The enemy Warthog's gunner had managed to grab the weapon his downed comrade had been using. Amber aimed at the gunner with her sniper rifle, just barely managing a headshot despite the commotion. But as the gunner fell, he left behind another group of glowing projectiles. This caused Amber to shout "INCOMING!"

Lemon and Yellow Team swerved as best they could. The energy impacted the ground directly in front of them, and the orbs of death went scattering into every Warthog's path. Having already witnessed the energy's effects, Lemon and Yellow Team instantly dove out of their vehicles. The front tires of all four of their Warthogs vanished just after their occupants bailed. Deryn looked up to see the Warthog she had been driving get eaten up right in front of her.

After enough green lights in her HUD had flashed (signifying that her team was okay), she shoved herself up from the ground, took out a fragmentation grenade, and hurled it at the Orange Warthog. It landed directly underneath the enemy vehicle, and it went up in a ball of flame. "I took the last one out," she said into her COM.

Patton was panting as he walked over to her. "That weaponâ€|that was bullshit! What was that?"

"No idea," Deryn responded. "I've never seen anything like it." The rest of the group gathered around.

"Well it probably has something to do with the Fourth Wall," said Clair.

"Sinclair?" Patton asked.

She elaborated: "We know that the Orange Army was sent beyond the Fourth Wallâ€|beyond a theorized slipspace barrier of some kindâ€|after the Battle of Earth, when that resonance cascade happened. So it seems pretty likely that this technology is what they picked up from that region of space."

Patton shook his helmet. "The Fourth Wall is a myth."

"It explains a lot though, Pinkie, you gotta admit," said Hearts. "Vincent intended to journey beyond it in order to repair the Giant Hand. He never got a chance, of course, but he believed it exists, and he also did a whole bunch of other things we didn't think were possible eitherâ€|such as that vortex in the canyonâ€|and the fact that he's a talking fusion coil, to name a few."

"But what actually lies beyond the Fourth Wall?" Patton asked. "Does anyone know?"

Hester shook her helmet. "No one doesâ€¦well, none except the Oranges, if Sinclair's idea is correct."

Tom had been glancing around at the battlefield. "Guys, we kind of need to move somewhere. There's a storm of fighting over yonder that way, and I don't think we want to still be here when it comes."

"You're right Shaw," said Hester. She opened her COM. "Colonel, you there?"

"Dudes!" said Oles from the other end. "Whoa, what the hell happened? Where're your vehicles?"

"Destroyed by Orange weaponry," said Hester. "Wherever it is we're supposed to be getting to, we'll have to get there on foot."

The sound of key tapping was heard. "Hm, that makes it a bit more complicated," said Oles. "I need to find you guys a way through." A moment later he said: "Okay, I got it. there's an old abandoned structure about five hundred meters northeast of your location." A location marker was added to everyone's HUDs.

"We got it," said Hester.

The group began to move. As he jogged, Ryan heard muttering to his side, and found Brian talking into some device which looked like a bulky cell phone. "Brian," he called over. "Are you really doing that now?" Brian turned and looked at him with an expression that a cat might wear after it had just vomited all over the new rug as its owners watched. Then he hurriedly put the device away. Ryan shook his helmet and jogged up to the front of the group.

Soon, the group came to a short building which had clearly seen better days. Its roof had completely caved in, so it wasn't going to provide any shelter, and everything was covered in plantlife. On the building's one level, there were a series of burnt out computers which had rust all over them, some bunks with moldy mattresses, and a floor which was covered in dirt. "This must once have been part of the outskirts of Trevelyan's city," said Clair.

"Great for cover. Not so great for digs," Hearts agreed. He walked over to the center table and dusted off some old manuals, but didn't find anything interesting.

"_Oh shit there's Purples outside,"_ said Ryan. Indeed, outside of the door the Yellows had just come through, a squad of alien vehicles had just pulled up. On a glance count, Ryan saw five Ghosts and one Wraith. Everyone immediately got into cover. It was anyone's guess how well the old walls of the building would stand against plasma fire, but a bit of cover was better than no cover.

"Do they know we're in here?" Amber whispered.

"_Yellows, we know you're in there!_" came an answer from outside.

"Dangit," said Amber.

"Are Travis and Guy still at our base?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah," said Hester. "Why?"

Ryan shrugged. "Would've been nice to have more manpower in this situation, is all. The Purples' will be sending vehicles over here until we've left. It might have been nice to have a greater number."

"We'll be fine Hobar," said Patton. "Lemon doesn't rely on manpower. We don't need luck, we make our own. And besides, I don't one hundred percent trust those two yet."

"I wonder what they're doing right now," said Ryan.

"Think about that later," said Hearts as gunfire blew the windows above them into shards.

* * *

><p>PFFFFFFFFFT<p>

"Good one!" said Guy Dudeperson.

"That's some good popcorn," said Travis Chamealon.

"And he has so much of it," Guy agreed.

"I know. That Hobar guy is addicted to this stuff."

"There are worse things you could be addicted to."

"Oh yeah, I don't doubt that." He let out another fart, which lasted longer than the previous one.

"You're sure Hobar's not gonna be back here for awhile, yeah?" Guy asked.

"Well they're supposed to be at some huge battle or something," said Travis. "So I'm thinking not."

Guy nodded. "Good. Because if he knew we were in his quarters, stuffing ourselves with his popcorn, while watching his Star Wars: The Clone Wars collection, I'm not sure exactly how he'd take it."

On the plasma screen television in front of them, a lightsaber duel was starting up. "Why does that one girl always have those two longâ€¦|thingsâ€¦|around her head?" Travis asked.

"Ashoka Tano? I think those things are called lekku."

"Huh," said Travis. "It just looks weird, is all."

Guy looked over. "You still playing with those dice?"

Travis was holding a pair of dice in his hand. "Yeah. Still can't get

my mind around the fact that, ever since Centerpoint City, I've been able to predict every outcome of every random device I've done something with." He called a two, then jiggle the dice and dropped then into his opposite palm. Sure enough, a pair of one's looked back up at him.

Guy turned back to the television. "I wonder what the Yellows are up to. We've officially joined their team. It seems right that we should be fighting along with them."

"Are you complaining?" said Travis as he grabbed another handful of popcorn.

Guy shook his helmet. "Hell no!"

* * *

><p>The Yellows were all ducking down next to a wall as bullets and plasma entered in through all the windows. Hester shouted into her COM: "Oles, we're under attack! Just where did you think you led us into!"<p>

"I'm sorry!" came Oles' response. "That was a predicted route that the Purple Army would use to reach the front lines."

"Come again?" said Hester.

"I think you guys might have stumbled into a Purple hideout. They were gone when I first looked up that location. But nowâ€|well, they seem to be back."

"Gee Colonel, you don't say!" said Deryn. She had some other, far less polite, things to say in mind, but chose not to because it wouldn't help anything.

"You guys need to find some way out of there," Oles offered helpfully.

"_Colonel!_" Patton shouted into his tacpad. "_If you do not start saying something useful right this moment, then the next moment I set eyes on you, I'm going to take out Lucy and I'm going toâ€|_"

"There's an underground maintenance tunnel underneath the rug in the main room," said Oles quickly. "That tunnel should lead you much closer toâ€|to your objective. And you'll be able to go underneath the battle, which should be nice."

The Yellows were already in the other room before Oles had stopped talking. Tom reached down and ripped up the rug, which had a heavy layer of dirt on it that splashed over everyone's armor. Now revealed underneath: a trapdoor. It had a padlock on it, but Lemon Squadron all blasted it at the same time. The padlock was turned to dust, and the trapdoor lid was shredded. "Is it safe?" Clair asked. "Very dark down there, if it's deep and the ladder breaks, someone could get hurt."

Inez picked up Brian, hefting him up with her robotic arm. And then like ragdoll, she simply dropped him into the hole. A second later there was a _thud_ sound and then the words "I'm fine. Thanks so much

for your consideration, Clair."

"They could follow us, boss," said Amber.

"We'll deal with that when it comes up," said Patton.

Suddenly, there was a flash of brilliant blue light, and suddenly the front wall in the entrance room was simply gone. A Wraith with a Purple in the cockpit had replaced the view. "Actually," said Hearts, "I think they're going to level the building and take us for dead. They don't even know this trapdoor is here, or they would've sent men in here by now." Another blast sounded which shook the ground, and the south-facing wall of the room they were standing in began to turn red and catch fire.

"Can we go now?" Ryan asked.

They all piled down into the hole. Brian was waiting to meet them like an energetic puppy waiting for its master. "Ooooh boy, it's dark down here. I wonder if there's a campfire and marshmallows someplace. I mean, probably not—but if there is, we can tell scary stories." There was a third blast from above, followed by the sound of several walls caving in, as well as a fire beginning to spread. "Actually, I don't think I want to!" said Brian. "I'm scared!"

The group began to walk down the tunnel. Soon the sounds of destruction faded. The tunnel was rather narrow, only about four meters wide, so they walked in single file. There was no lighting whatsoever (there probably hadn't been any electricity for places like this since Trevelyan's city had been destroyed a few years ago.) Over COMs, Oles informed them that they needed to go down the tunnel for roughly five kilometers before they would reach their objective, whatever that turned out to be.

"Oles," said Hester sternly. "You had better not be sending into some trap."

"Don't worry," said Oles. "No one's been using this tunnel for two and a half years."

Expressing his desire for a campfire gathering, Brian took out a flashlight from his tool belt, illuminated the chin and started singing Kum Ba Yah. This lasted for roughly twenty minutes, which was when they finally came to the end of the maintenance tunnel. Brian finally stopped singing, and everyone was relieved. Oles got back with them over radio, telling them that their objective was just over the next hill.

"At last," said Wren. "We'll finally get to see what this whole battle is being fought over." In the distance, they could hear the sounds of battle. Everyone from all Armies had gathered at the front lines, and now those hundreds of thousands of soldiers were concentrated at the area they had just left. The sun was higher in the sky now, and the grass moved in the breeze. It was so very peaceful for a battlefield. The Yellows made their way up the hill, crouching down when they got to the top so that they could look down and not be noticed. Their objective indeed lay before them.

A town of Yellow firebases (much smaller than the one near the front lines, but still sizable) sat nestled in the grassy valley below. The

encampment was a ring of structures, all of which surrounded a huge opening into the ground. The place was packed with Yellows, all marching purposefully between the buildings. But what Yellow Team gaped at was the giant hole in the ground: it was not natural, but nor did it look to have been constructed by any human. Instead, it was a huge shaft leading down into the earth, covered with many levels of something resembling glass or transparent plastic, and glowing all over with otherworldly lights. The hole was breathtakingly huge, easily large enough to fit half of the canyon from the Halothrii Wilderness inside of it.

"Pardon me for sounding British," said Ryan. "But what in the bloody hell is that!"

It was Oles who attempted to answer his question. "_That_", Specialist Hobar, it the entrance to an underground installation, a gigantic one."

"It's alien," said Wren. "I don't know of any human structure of this scale or design. I can't even tell what material the walls of the shaft are made out of. definitely not glass, or plastic, or a combination of the two."

"You're right," said Oles over the radio. "It is alien. And what's inside of it could change the war."

"Well let's get to it, then," said Hearts. He was about to get up and start walking down the hill, when suddenly he shot back down, and told everyone to keep their heads to the ground. Brian was about to shout out _what is it_ when Hester shushed him in the nick of time. Amber spotted it next: a shadow of people creeping over the ridge from the east. Orange soldiers in droves were popping up, in human vehicles, and many of them were carrying in their hands the odd weaponry Lemon had just witnessed on the battlefield. Down below, the Yellow base had no idea it was under threat.

"Oh look, Oranges," said Tom, pointing them out to the others. "I don't mean the fruit."

"Boss," said Ryan in full British accent, for some reason. "This is not a pleasant situation. I think there's about to be a scuffle." He also sounded quite nervous, understandably.

On the other side of the valley, a dozen Oranges stepped forwards, holding out and aiming weapons with a metallic sheen and an angular geometry. Yellow Team and Lemon recognized them immediately. "We have to do something!" Clair said loudly.

"I'll radio them," said Wren. She immediately began hitting button on her tacpad. Soon, there was the sound of a dial tone, like the ones heard on a landline. "I'm being redirected to the commander's landline!" Wren hissed. "Ah, pick up, damn you!"

After maybe fifteen seconds, there was a response. "Hello, who is this?" said a rather bored tone of voice.

"You're under attack!" Wren shouted into her tacpad.

"I was unaware there were any drills scheduled for today," said the Commander from the other end.

"_It's not a drill!"_ said Wren.

Far up above, the twelve Oranges fired their weapons. A stream of bright fiery orbs cascaded down towards the base. "Oh hell," Patton commented. It wasn't long before his prediction came true.

24. The Power Core Empire

24 " THE POWER CORE EMPIRE

A series of very loud explosions, combined with plenty of screaming, as well as alarm klaxons, were a sure sign that everything was NOT okay. The Yellow encampment did not disappoint in this regard. Five dozen bright orbs of energy scattered throughout the base, incinerating everything in their path. "It's like a Bouncy-Ball Playcourse of doom," Brian commented as he and the rest of the team raced down the hillside towards the endangered base.

"We have to get inside that installation," said Hester. "And get whatever's in there before the Oranges find it."

"I copy," said Pete Oles over COMs. "The only way down into it is through the uncovered entrance. There should be a lift somewhere around the perimeter of the opening."

The Yellows finally reached the ground level of the valley, and sprinted into a sea of soldiers frantically heading to battle stations. The Yellows were heading for the nearest firebase, a sturdy structure just like the rest, with smaller buildings surrounding it. Several squadrons of other Yellow soldiers had taken cover behind it, and were firing back up at the Oranges. But several of the energy orbs impacted the ceiling of the structure, somehow managing to ignite some things inside, and the firebase suddenly exploded, sending the Yellow soldiers flying backwards. Lemon and Yellow Team raced over as quickly as they could. Inez reached down with her robotic arm and yanked a few of the soldiers off the ground. Many of them were rolling on the ground, trying to put out the flames on their armor.

"Are you guys Lemon Squadron?" one soldier asked them.

"Where's the base commander?" Hester asked as her only response, a stern command. "We need to speak with him right now."

The soldier simply pointed, panting. "The other end"

The Yellows followed his finger. They could hear the sound of a battle cry, as Oranges pounded down like an avalanche, coming to sweep through the base. And from the other side of the base could be heard many sounds of gunfire, clearly a squad led by the base commander. Clair gave a quick look over to the soldiers to make sure they would all live, but then Lemon and Yellow Team had to leave the soldiers where they were, sprinting after the distant bangs with no time to spare.

The Yellows were surrounded by explosions as they ran through the base. They came to a street enclosed by buildings on both sides. Many soldiers were running in the same direction they were, pouring out of

the structures nonstop. Several soldiers looked up into the sky, pointing out something. Several orbs came crashing down into the street. Yellow Team immediately got to the site of the street to let the orbs bounce past. Yet they weren't the only thing that came out of the sky: one of the skybridges directly over the street came crashing down like an arm reaching to the ground, one of its ends slowly vanishing into glowing dust. A Warthog driving along the street nearly got caught under it: the skybridge landed right in front of the vehicle, and the driver had to swerve to avoid it, nearly toppling the Warthog over as he turned as sharply as possible. The vehicle got past the skybridge just a second before its other end snapped off of its building and joined the first end on the street. The street before Yellow Team was now completely cut off. Patton let out a curse, but soon Amber grabbed his arm and indicated to the group an entrance into the building nearest them, which she guessed they could go through to reach another street on its other side.

Rushing through the door, the group came into what appeared to be some kind of science lab complex. In the room in which they stood, several rows of computers stretched out before them which were clearly running some kind of scan on the excavation below the encampment. Wren couldn't help looking at one. "Energy utilization schematicsâ€|ohmygod!"

"What?" Hearts asked. The group rushed over and began peeking over her shoulder.

"These computers are calculating plans for a fleet larger than any I have even heard of before." She did some typing, looking through some of the files. "And this is being made possible by a completely ridiculous estimation of energy stored in the excavation."

"Maybe not so ridiculous," said Tom. "Could this be the 'game changer for the entire galaxy' that Bradley was talking about?"

Wren shrugged. "Maybe. But I've never heard of something which can store so much energy."

Patton crossed his arms. "Whatever the case, we need to get the hell down there and sort this shit out. Making sure the Oranges don't get their slimy gauntlets whatever the excavation holds: that's the priority."

"And I think I might have a few words with Oles when all this is over," said Hearts. "He's been briefed on everything going on here, but the little bastard's been holding out on us because whoever's above him decided that even we should be kept in the dark. But this cannot last: if we are to get anything done here, we have got to know just what the hell is going on!"

"I heard that, you know," said Oles over COMs. "I can hear everything."

"I'll be sure to have a word about that too," said Hearts. "Now then, we need to get to the base commander as soon as possible. He can give us access to the lifts down into the excavation."

Hester nodded. "Sis, start finishing up."

"On it," said Wren. She inserted a flash drive into the computer.

"Uuuuummmâ€¦" said Oles. "You're downloading classified information. I, uhâ€¦I think you should stop."

"This 'classified information' is vital to our mission here," said Wren. "I'd love to see you explain to Bradley how we were unable to complete our objective, regarding possibly the fate of the galactic war, because you refused to go along with this. And furthermore, I'm sure Bradley would also be very interested to hear about that YellowTube channel you've been keeping on us. I'm sure _that's perfectly legal."

The gulp on the other end was all Wren needed to hear. She yanked out the flash drive from the computer and stood up. Hester nodded approvingly at her. "Let's go."

The group headed through the complex and burst through double doors into another street within the encampment. Lots of debris and charred things lay scattered about, but the street itself was fortunately usable this time, with no fallen skybridge. Everyone hurried along, moving towards the sound of gunfire and screaming. The gaping shaft to the underground installation became nearer and nearer, and the debris became more thickly concentrated, eventually gaining bodies which were mixed in with the rubble. Lemon and Yellow Team soon came to their destination, as well as the warzone which came along with it.

The shaft was the size of a small football field, and both sides of it were the center for conflict. On the side nearest side was a whole company of soldiers, all hunkering down behind erected cover. Firing at them from the other side was a company of Orange soldiers, and their number was at least twice that of the Yellows. Bullets, shrapnel, and energy projectiles were flying back and forth between both parties, and the air directly above the shaft had become a sea of quickly moving objects and beams. Yellow Team and Lemon immediately ran over and joined the hundreds of Yellow soldiers behind the concrete wall. "Where's the commanding officer?" Hester shouted into her tacpad.

"Right near you," said Pete Oles. "He's the one to your right who's leading the firing right now. His parents must've been very fond of the letter J, because his name is James-John Jenson. He's a Major."

Hester looked to her right and saw a group of Yellows hoisting heavy weaponry over the concrete wall. One of the men was standing back and shouting orders: Major Jenson, beyond a doubt. "Major!" Hester shouted over to him. He turned and looked in her direction. She called again, but he shook his helmet, not hearing her over the noise. She activated her COMs. "Major," she said into her mike. "This is Hester Sharp of Lemon Squadron. We've been sent here to enter the excavation and oversee whatever is down there."

The reply was a relieved tone. "Well thank god reinforcements came from _somewhere_. Yellow Command meant to get us backup since this encampment came under attack, but the Purple Army has all remaining forces on these fields stuck on the front lines."

"We need to get down into the installation before the Oranges do," said Hester.

The Major nodded at her, though he was temporarily distracted. The heavy weaponry before him had finished being set up. He shouted "FIRE!" and the weapons let loose. A series of rockets and propelled grenades sailed across the top of the shaft. The Oranges on the other side ducked behind cover just before they hit. A great section of the concrete wall on the Orange's side was blown away, but from a quick look it did not appear that many Orange soldiers had gone with it. The Major cursed and then turned back to Hester. "We need to drive the Orange Army from here, and then we can claim the installation."

Hester shook her helmet. "That's not going to work. There are more than twice as many of them than there are us. Even if we manage to drive them off eventually, they could get into the installation themselves before they leave, and we can't let that happen. My Squadron and I can head down and secure the objective, while you and your men stay out here and guard the entrance."

Jenson paused, but then nodded. "I don't like it, but you're right." He nodded over at the center of the top of the shaft, which held a platform the size of a cargo lift. Four thin walkways connected to it from the sides of the shaft. "That's the way down. Getting to it will not be easy."

"There is always a way," said Hester. She turned back to her squad. "Everyone, we're going to have to make a run for it!"

There was suddenly a tremendous roar, and half the concrete wall everyone was taking cover behind suddenly disintegrated, and everyone ran out of the way as a series of energy projectiles came crashing through. Lemon and Yellow Team managed to all get out of the way in time, but a dozen soldiers got caught in the fire and were quickly turned into vapor. "WE HAVE TO GET DOWN THERE NOW!" Patton shouted.

"We're out of time," Hester agreed. To the Major, she shouted: "We need cover. We're taking the lift now!"

The Major looked at her and nodded. Then he had his men set up their heavy weapons again. "On my mark—FIRE!" The weapons let loose. At the same time, Lemon and Yellow Team burst out from cover and ran across the walkway like they had never run before. As they moved, rockets and grenades flew up from behind them, while energy projectiles came at them from the front. And below them, the shaft was an abyss of colored lights. Clair and Ryan got vertigo looking down at it even for a second, wobbling and slowing down, but Inez reached out and set them up right. Finally they reached the lift. It was little more than a square metal platform with a control console. Hearts was the first on the platform. He reached out instantly and hit the button to start the platform. The last of the group made it on just as the platform jolted and started heading down. The Oranges continued to fire at them as they slowly descended, but the assault lessened as the platform went deeper into the shaft. Their surrounding turned into nothing but a great sea of lights. Ryan started openmouthed, gazing around at the eye candy.

It was perhaps five full minutes before the lift came to a stop. By

this point, it had likely taken them more than a kilometer below the surface of the planet. The floor of the shaft's bottom was made of more of the transparent glass-like stuff. At one end of the shaft was a door shaped like half a hexagon, yet much wider at its base than it was high. It was made of a cool metallic substance which shone in the blue alien light of the shaft. Inez and Ryan began readying the explosives they had brought along with them, expecting the door to need to be blown open, but as the group stepped forward, several lines running along the door's surface suddenly blinked with white light, and the door slid open like an automatic grocery store entrance. The two weapons specialists quickly re-gathered their equipment, then hurried up to the rest of the group as quickly as possible. "That's odd," said Ryan. "It just let us in. Don't you think an ancient alien civilization would want to keep their shit under lock and key?" Then he stopped, almost stumbling into the backs of Lemon Squadron. "Whooooaaaâ€|"

The chamber before them was massive, far larger than the shaft they had just come from. It was cylindrical in shape, shorter than the shaft by a large margin, but vastly wider. Five football stadiums could easily have fit inside of it. But something else was taking up that space, and it was far more intriguing than a football stadium could ever dream of being. The entire chamber was completely packed with metallic boxes, all neatly stacked into sections and rows which stretched like towers, approaching the ceiling. At a quick estimation, there had to be millions of the things. The Yellows walked calmly into the chamber, making their way through the streets which separated the towers of stacked devices. "Impossibleâ€|" breathed Wren as she stared at her tacpad.

"What is it, sis?" Hester asked.

"According to the scans I've been doingâ€|each individual one of these devices holds enough energy to power a cruiser!"

The others stopped. "_What?"_ Hearts asked out of surprise. The rest of the group gathered around Wren, staring at her tacpad as best they could all manage at the same time.

"These things are all basically batteries," Wren elaborated. "I can't figure out how they work, but there's enough energy stored in here to power a fleet capable of overwhelming the entire galaxyâ€|and then again, ten times over!"

"She's right!" Ryan shouted, doing his own tacpad scans on a nearby device. "My readings are giving me back readings in _Petajoules_. Do you guys have any idea how much a Petajoule is? It's equivalent to about four hundred _kilotons_ of TNT. Each one of these devices holds about _twenty_ _Petajoules_. And this room has _millions_ of these devices! This is insane!"

"Those schematics I downloaded about that gigantic fleetâ€|" said Wren.

"These devices are the means," said Tom with nothing but recognition. "Halcor intends to power the Yellow Army to absolute victory."

Deryn had her hands about her waists, and was staring around at the chamber in awe. "How long do you suppose Halcor knew about this, guys?"

Patton shook his helmet. "It's impossible to say. I wonder if our little radio friend knows anything about this."

"He can't tell us even if he does," said Clair, staring at her own tacpad. "I'm not picking up any signals from the surface. We're just too far below ground."

"_And hopefully you will be heading back above ground very soon,"_ said a voice from out of nowhere.

The Yellows looked around wildly. "That didn't come over radio!" said Clair.

"Indeedâ€¦it did not," said the same voice again.

The Yellows then thought to look down at the ground. Several of the devices had somehow come to stand in a circle around the Yellows. Ryan jumped back out of surprise. "Whaoâ€¦where'd they all come from?"

"Walking on two legs, are we?" said the voice again. "My my, you creatures are the most ridiculous things I have _ever_ seen. Not only that you need legs, but that you only decide to use two of them when you have four. You must all be terribly stupid."

Amber narrowed her gaze. "Boss, the devices are talking to us."

"Oh God not more talking batteries," said Ryan. "At least these aren't fusion coils!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the device standing directly in front of them. "You have insulted me! Firstlyâ€¦you stupid creatureâ€¦we are far more than just batteries. _We are Power Cores. _We are all sentient beings capable of performing complex calculations on a quantum level, and are therefore, clearly above suchâ€¦un-evolved beings such as yourselves. And secondly, that you would in any way compare us to fusion coils. Shame upon you, whatever the hell it is you actually are!"

One of the power cores next to the first one whispered to it, just loud enough that the Yellows could hear: "We didn't evolve. We were built, remember!"

"Be quiet!" the first power core hissed, somehow.

"How can you hate us for not having any legs?" Ryan asked. "You don't have any legs."

"But of course not!" the first power core exclaimed. "We do not need legs, for you seeâ€¦we are _beyond_ legs. We have transcended them." It then tipped itself over onto the floor and rolled a few feet closer to the Yellows. Then it continued: "We do not need to rely on such primitive instruments as _legs_ for transportation."

That was when Brian decided to join in. "We don't need legs to travel either, actually," he stated. He then laid down on the floor and put his arms at his sides.

"Blue, please don't encourage them," Patton protested.

But before anyone could stop him, Brian had begun to roll on his side like a rolling pin. Instantly, the power cores cried out in surprise. "Look at that!" one of them shouted. "It is using our ancient method of transportation!"

"This is a trick!" another shouted. "It cannot be real."

The first power core shouted: "What sorcery is this? We must bring them all before the Lord of the Digest, and he will decide if they are genuine or evil!"

Patton put a slug into Lucy and cocked her. "We're not going anywhere, you eccentric charger pack. I swear, you sound like a snobbish version of Nome with about a tenth the intelligence!"

The lead power core suddenly sent out a lightning bolt from its top side, which struck the ground just in front of the Yellows, causing several of them to jump back on instinct. Where the bolt had struck, the floor was red hot. "You will come with us or you will die. Should you choose the life option, you will follow us to the leader of our Empire, the Lord of the Digest, and he shall decide your ultimate fate."

"Did you say _empire_?" Amber asked.

"Yeeeeees, indeed," said the first Power Core. "For that is our plan, you see. The wars of your people above have opened the way for us to reach the surface. Did you seriously think that the door to this chamber unlocked in its own? No, of course it did not. The uncovering of the shaft has given us passage out of this chamber, to the realms above. From there, we shall enslave your puny galaxy and all its people. For we are the Power Core Empire."

"The stupidity never ends," Patton whispered to Hearts. Both of them lightly snickered.

"What is that?" the power core demanded. "Are you snickering in the presence of the Master Plan? You insolent creatures, how dare you!"

"If you don't want us making fun of it," Hearts recommended, "Then you could have made it less funny. And less cliché."

"Aaah, but are your own comments but witty retorts, or are they your DOOM?" the power core shouted at him. "The Lord of the Digest shall decide."

Hester rolled her visor. "Very well then, power cores. Take us to your leader."

"And we shall," said the power core with intent. "For he is already aware of your presence, and awaits your audience. It is time for me and my men escort you to meet him."

So they did.

Towers of power cores reached up like skyscrapers, becoming taller as the Yellows headed deeper towards the heart of the chamber, the center of this civilization of power cores. The Yellows began to notice power cores moving around and actually doing day to day business, instead of just lying dormant inside huge stacks: the streets of the city actually were streets, for there were power cores rolling along in lanes, and on the side of the street were even cores with magazines, having telekinetically lifted them up as though they were reading them. For that matter, many of the cores travelling along the streets actually had briefcases levitated above themselves as they rolled.

Soon came their destination. The streets became wider and more active, and the towers actually seemed to touch the chamber ceiling. The core leading the Yellows led them to one of the tallest towers, which had a square entrance just large enough for them to walk through. Inside, just like the outside, the walls and surfaces were all composed of dormant power cores, as did indeed the entirety of the tower. The power core took the Yellows to a very large spiral staircase. The core ordered the Yellows to all walk as quietly as possible. They did their best, bringing their feet down slowly as they moved up each step. Their captors followed closely behind, levitating themselves quickly up each step, which looked like hopping to the untrained eye. The walk was a long one, for the staircase took them up to the highest level of the tower, and those not in Lemon Squadron were out of breath by the time they finally reached the top.

"Oh thank God," gasped Ryan as they got to the final landing. "I couldn't take much more."

"You might be in better shape if you ate more than popcorn and soda in your life," said Patton, striding by without so much as a twinge of fatigue.

The power core rolled up to a very large door at the end of the landing which was made of power core with gold colored paint. "Humansâ€|your fate awaits you through here."

The door hummed electronically, and slowly slid open. On the other side stretched an extravagant rooftop, with all the walls made of gold-painted power cores. They were clearly atop the highest building of the city, for not ten meters above their heads was the ceiling to the entire city chamber, and looking out from the landing one could see the entire city down below, which from afar looked like an abyss of tall grey LEGO blocks. The Yellows walked slowly forward. On both sides of them were long lines of what appeared to be power core guards: golden cores which telekinetically held long sharp metal sticks at their sides. Eventually they came to the other end of the rooftop, and there the strangeness climaxed: there was a golden throne composed of power cores, all of which were singing some kind of praise hymn to the one sitting upon it in gentle tones.

The being sitting in the throne was definitely not human, but not really like the power cores either: this being actually seemed to be some kind of meld between multiple cores, the bodies of four cores placed end-to-end at one point to make a tetrahedron. The point where the ends met was a white light. The bottom three cores served as

triped legs, while the top core pointed straight up, and on the forward facing side of the top core was a golden moustache made of steel.

The Yellows were all made to kneel before the ridiculous thing. One of the cores that composed the throne shouted out: "Behold, biped creatures. The one before you, the Energy Core of our domain, is none other thanâ€|the Lord of the Architectural Digest Magazines, Ruler of the Power Core Empire, the One Known Only asâ€|Ned the Great!"

The one on the throne (whose species was apparently called an Energy Core) then spoke: "The epic glory of my Golden Moustache has gained word of your arrival, and finds the event quite interesting. Tell me, puny biped creatures, what brings you here?"

It was Hearts who chose to address the Energy Core. "Well it's nice to meet you tooâ€|Nedâ€|and what brought us down here is your frankly gigantic energy signature, which we picked up from above." He paused for a moment, thinking. And then he raised both arms in praise. "We were mesmerized by your glorious static electric aura, and we have descended into this great city to discuss with you the possibility of your people joining us upon the surface above." Patton rolled his visor as Hearts talked.

However, the Energy Core was impressed. In a classic monotone robotic voice which was nonetheless energetic, he exclaimed: "You are all indeed friends if you have come seeking to bask in the epic, glorious magnificence of my Golden Moustache. I am willing to forgive all of you for having legs, in exchange for your loyalty to me."

"Well that's very kind of you," said Hearts.

Brian put in: "Your moustache is indeedâ€|VERY goldenâ€|and shiny. Wow, it really is magnificent! Do you guys see it?"

Ned the Energy Core continued: "As a token of my good faith, I am willing to allow all of you to read some of the content within The Great Vault."

"You have a vault," said Hearts. "I mean, that's wonderful. And just what is in this vault, if I may ask?"

"The Epic Glory of my Architectural Digest collection," Ned replied with reverence.

"Aâ€|digest collectionâ€|" Hearts replied hesitantly.

"Indeed," said Ned. "For that is why this grand civilization you see before has such high moral values, because all our interior designs are carefully checked according to the Glory of the Architectural Digest. And there is no greater value in our society than glorious interior design."

Hearts nodded. "It is good to see that this grand civilization is led by such high moral standards. This is a boon to the mission of my own people, for you seeâ€|we have come down here seeking an alliance with you."

There was a great silence. And then the Energy Core laughed. It sounded like a monotone radio booming, like a stereo on the highway

that other drivers could _feel_ coming before they heard it. "Bipeds, you amuse me. I am almost touched by your efforts, but it seems that you misunderstand the glory of my Golden Moustache. My civilization has no intention whatsoever of _allying_ with anyone. We are going to rise up from this city to the surface—and conquer your world."

"So we have heard," said Hearts while stifling a laugh.

"You bipeds are entertaining enough that I think I shall let you live," said the Energy Core. "And I do intend to even let you into the Great Vault to enlighten yourselves about the glory of interior design. However—if any of you try to contact the outside world, you will be vaporized instantly."

Hearts crossed his arms. "Well I'm afraid we can't quite accept that, Mr. Ned."

At once, the power core guards on either side began to move closer, forming a ring around the Yellows. Everyone readied their weapons. "I was wondering when we'd get to this part," Patton said as he loaded a shell into Lucy. "It was a pretty decent attempt, Hearts, but I could tell pretty quickly that these magazine-obsessed douchebags weren't gonna give us so much as the time of day."

"I would much rather that you didn't resist," said Ned. "The epic glory of my Golden Moustache really doesn't want to see such entertaining creatures as yourselves be destroyed."

"Boss—" Clair whispered to Patton. "You do realize that they actually _can_ vaporize us, don't you? And we can't actually kill any of these cores, because if even one of them explodes, it will take out this entire continent."

"Well we sure as hell can't surrender!" he replied sternly. "They can't take one of us out without risking us taking one of them out, and if that happens then their whole civilization disappears. They won't attack us, because they can't."

There was the sound of the cores all powering up—and then everyone just stared at each other.

"I think this is what you call a Mexican Standoff," said Ryan.

The Energy Core's Golden Moustache rotated a full 360 degrees in annoyance. "Oh, I hate these moments! The epic glory of my Golden Moustache abhors awkwardness." It took in a long breath, and then ordered: "Please, everyone power down, and let's talk about this."

The guards powered down their weapons, and the Yellows did the same.

"I think we might have gotten off on slightly the wrong track," said Ned. "Since neither of us can attack the other, I think we should all just relax and think happy thoughts."

"If no one can kill anyone else without destroying the continent, I can't imagine how you manage crime here," Ryan blurted out.

Patton was about to smack him, but Tom managed to tend to the

situation first. "What he means isâ€|you have such a remarkably peaceful city. It is really quite wonderful."

Ned actually seemed quite delighted. "Well, I'm glad you think so! You know, I do seem to have misjudged you. Perhaps I should just show you all around the city, and we can talk over thingsâ€|"

There was suddenly a great rumble from the ceiling of the city. At first it sounded like thunder, but soon the Yellows were able to pick up mechanical frequencies. Everyone looked around in confusion. "What the hell could that be?" Deryn asked, voicing the concerns of her team. Then the domes top of the chamber actually began to shake, which was awesome so see in light of its size.

"I'm really not liking this, guys!" said Ryan.

Small explosions were now happening on the ceiling, little bright flashes which sent gusts of debris down into the city. Meanwhile, the rumbling was getting louderâ€|much louder.

"Drills," said Hester. "Someone is drilling into the city!" Sure enough, great rotating pieces of metal came crashing through the dome ceiling, looking like misplaced airplanes from afar as they plummeted down into the city, creating enormous crashing sounds.

"What is this?" Ned shouted. "The epic glory of my Golden Moustache demands to know what his happening. Is this your people?"

Everyone shook their helmets madly. "No, no!" said Wren. "Our Army doesn't have giant drills!"

As everyone kept watching, their questions were suddenly answered. There was a humming sound all throughout the chamber, coming from the ceiling. And then a multitude of air vehicles began pouring through the vertical tunnels, a combination of Hornets, Falcons, and alien Banshees. The former two types were piloted by Orange soldiers, and the Banshees were piloted by Purples. A great swarm of them just kept pouring in through the tunnels. The legions of flying vehicles flew above the city for some moments, and then all suddenly began to turn towards the palace, the rooftop of which was where the Yellows and Ned were standing.

"Oh shit, the Purples and Oranges really are working together," said Ryan.

"They must also realize they can't attack the power cores without destroying the continent," said Tom. "Which must be why they aren't bombing this whole place."

Ned the Energy Core laughed. "Ah, but my people are not so hindered! In the name of my glorious moustache, open fire, my soldiers!"

The guards did so: with a few seconds of great electronic humming, they suddenly released a torrent of lightening which vaporized the first wave of oncoming air vehicles. It sounded like a noisy thunderstorm as a rain of flaming metallic debris sank down to the streets below. However, that had only been a very small fraction of the aircraft in the city, and the ones taken out were just as soon replaced a moment later by other aircraft which had come from the center of the city.

"Sis," said Wren to Hester. "We need to do something. If the power cores keep destroying the enemy aircraft, eventually one of them is going to shoot a power core out of self defenseâ€¦and we can't let that happen!"

Hester nodded. "You're right. This isn't Balloon Fight at the OK Corral, this is a serious fight where the other side might accidentally fire on a power core on instinct." She crossed her arms. "Which leaves only one course of action: we have to draw the aircraft away from here."

"Away from the city?" Wren asked. "But then we'd be giving up the whole place to the enemy. We can't do that."

Hester shook her helmet. "I wasn't thinking that." She turned to Ned the Energy Core. "Can you clear the street right outside this palace?"

"This whole sector of the city is already being evacuated," Ned replied. "The street below should be clear. Do you mean to draw the attackers away from us?" Upon Hester's nod, Ned commented: "Good. Perhaps you creatures are not _so_ ridiculous after all."

Hester turned to the rest of the Yellows and sent them an order indicator on their HUDs. "C'mon. We're Oscar Mike!" The Yellows followed her and Wren back down the spiral staircase. It was much easier down than up, and no one had yet started to feel fatigue by the time they had come down to street level. As Ned had said it would be, the streets were no completely deserted. A few hastily dropped briefcases, as well as many lying-open architectural digest magazines, were lying along the sector, but all the power cores were gone, which was the part that really mattered. "And now everyone, it's time to bring the fight to us!" said Hester.

"Oh yeah!" exclaimed Ryan as he pulled out his trusty rocket launcher off his back, and Inez pulled out a disturbingly large chaingun from somewhere on her extensive tool compartments, and both of them aimed their weapons at the sky. The aircraft above actually seemed to see the Yellows even before their weapons specialists actually started firing. They came roaring downwards towards the street as Ryan and Inez opened fire. Hearts and Amber also provided some assistance, by taking out what they could with their sniper rifles. As Ryan's rockets took out a Falcon, Hearts' sniper shot took out a Banshee pilot straight through the canopy. But by then, the aircraft were low enough to open fire, and within the next moment the Yellows had to abandon their position and move further down the street.

Brilliant orbs of energy bounced horrifyingly along at the spot where the Yellows had been standing, and were soon joined by rockets and machinegun fire. The Yellows kept moving back along the street, taking out a vehicle every moment or so. "You can't expect us to take out every single vehicle in the attack force," said Amber. "There are thousands of these guys. We simply can't deal with them all."

"I'm on it," said Wren. "Now that there are holes in the ceiling leading to the surfaceâ€¦it's unlikely there'd be reception in here, but it's still worth a shot." Into her mike, she said: "Hello? Yellow Command, this is Lemon Squadron. Do you read me?"

The response she got was not from someone she particularly wanted to speak to, but at least it was someone from the outside. "I read you okay, guys!" said Pete Oles from the other end of the transmission.

"Were in the city of power cores, and it's under attack from both the Oranges and Purples," Wren stated bluntly. "We need backup NOW!"

"I'll see what I can do," said Pete. "Our forces on the surface have managed to secure the actual entrance to the power core containment chamber. But the entire battle on the fields above has moved to the base right outside the elevator entrance, and now there's a frankly enormous battle going on there. You should know that the Orange Army has some kind of drill that it's using to dig down through the ground to get to the chamber"

"_We know,_" said Wren. "That's why we need reinforcements, because there are _thousands_ of enemy aircraft pouring into this chamber, and my squadron alone cannot hold them all off."

"Uh-huh" said Pete, sounding distracted. "I see."

"So do something!" Wren snapped.

"Right, right," said Pete with sudden change in focus. "Um, I'm gonna order a squad at the entrance base to head down the elevator and meet you in that chamber."

"Make sure it's a battalion," said Wren. "Because that's what we need right now." She had to perform a dive-roll as a Banshee fired a great green glob of plasma in her direction. She heard a great roar behind her, and stood up to see the Banshee fly straight over her helmet. Then there was a shot from a sniper rifle, and the alien aircraft exploded into pieces.

"All right," said Oles. "Two hundred soldiers have been sent. They're heading to the elevator as we speak."

"That's a start," said Wren.

"You can meet them at the entrance to the chamber itself," said Oles. "They should be there in about five minutes."

"We copy," said Wren. "But make sure they know that we'll be bringing a hell of a lot of enemies with us." She then closed the connection and turned to the other Yellows. "You guys catch all that?" She was greeted by an array of green lights which flashed on her HUD.

"Let's move out!" called Hester.

"Gladly," said Ryan as he looked back and saw with mild horror the legion of aircraft approaching. Without further pause, the Yellows turned and made a beeline for the entrance to the city.

26. The Might of the Empress

26 " THE MIGHT OF THE EMPRESS

The city rumbled as the Yellows fled. Legions of Purples and Oranges followed in airborne vehicles, and behind them, Pelicans and Phantoms were dropping off land-based forces. The Yellows wove in between small streets, trying to maintain cover despite being shot at from both the side and the air. The Yellows had just come to the crossing of a large street, which was going to be very difficult because of the noticeable lack of sky protection. Suddenly, a line of floating golden power cores appeared in front of them. "Hop onto us!" one of them shouted at the Yellows. "We will take you to the city entrance." As the Yellows looked at each other, the cores lowered themselves closer to the ground, inviting the Yellows to step on. The leader of the group, Hester was the first to try doing so. As soon as she set her boot upon a core's surface, she instantly felt herself levitate onto the center of the coil via some electromagnetic field. Then the coil lifted off the ground.

"They're going to fly us?" said Wren. "I dunno about this, sis."

A sudden boom echoed from behind them. "I don't think we have a choice, guys," Amber said. "The enemy is right out our tail."

Recognizing the truth of that statement, the Yellows each climbed into one of the cores. Just like Hester was, they all became levitated in place, at which point the cores took off from the ground. "Let's all hope this ends well," said Ryan. The cores rose until they were above the level of most buildings, at which point they all came into a V formation, and took off in the direction of the city entrance. They flew like Longsword Fighters, albeit much smaller and more agile. But they streaked across the city at a speed that someone standing on the ground would probably not have been able to follow with their eyes. Enemy aircraft were still pouring in through the new holes in the chamber's ceiling, and they attempted to intercept the power cores in fleets. But the cores discharged strokes of lightening which vaporized everything in their path. The city echoed as Ryan gave a series of enthusiastic whoops, and Brian (who many of the Yellows suddenly remembered was with them) started jovially exclaiming at the view.

They arrived at the chamber entrance within just seconds. The power cores swooped down, and sure enough, a company of roughly two hundred soldiers were waiting for them, having just gotten down the elevator shaft. Their commanding officer was at the front, and he saluted. It was Pete Oles. "Oh fantastic," Patton muttered under his breath.

"Hey guys," said Oles. "I decided you might need my help, so I came down from my post."

"We didn't," said Hester abruptly, nearly cutting Oles off.

Oles seemed as though he was waiting for a "thanks anyways" but when he didn't get one after a moment, he simply nodded. "Right. So what's the situation?"

Hester simply pointed behind her. Oles moved his gaze to the scene of destruction at the city. "Whoa, that's a lot goin' on there. We're gonna need backup. A LOT of it!" He opened his tacpad. "This is Colonel Pete Oles, Twelfth Company. Calling for reinforcements at the installation's elevator shaft. The underground chamber is under

attack by air assault. I repeat, the underground chamber is under attack. At least a division is needed." A moment later, his tacpad beeped, indicating that the order had been received. "Right, I've sent in for about two thousand soldiers to rendezvous with us. They'll be with us in about five."

Patton was about to make a comment about getting the situation under control when the whole shaft started to shake. Many people nearly fell over. The Yellows looked around wildly. "What the hell is that?" Ryan asked.

"Something's going on up above!" Oles exclaimed. The roar eventually subsided, but the sounds of conflict remained: distant beats of gunfire and explosions. At the same time, a large cloud of smoke was eschewing down from above, carrying with it the scent of char and heated metal.

"We need to get back up the shaft," said Hester. "Something huge is happening up there."

"But what about the city?" Amber asked.

"Oles and his lot will have to take care of it," said Patton. He turned to Oles. "I trust you can do that?"

Oles nodded as Brian might right after receiving a huge chocolate treat. "Oh yeah, totally! I meanâ€|yessir."

"Let's head out, then," said Hester.

The group of power cores which had delivered the Yellows suddenly flew in their path. "We shall accompany you," said one of them. "The Epic Glory of the Lord of the Digest's Moustache specifically ordered us to assist you in any matters you require."

Hester shrugged. "I don't see why not. Come on then. We can all take the lift. I don't much care for flying, if it's all the same to you." She began walking towards the lift, while the power cores and the rest of Lemon and Yellow Team followed behind her.

Wren was already at the levitating platform, getting it to activate again. Soon it rose gently from the floor and stopped twenty centimeters in midair. "Got it, sis," Wren reported.

They all got on, and as soon as they did the platform began to move slowly upwards. The sounds from above were only getting louder as the Yellows and their comrades approached the top. The explosions revealed themselves to be far more than just the standard heavy weapons explosions: the sounds were actually mechanical roars that could only have been coming from something HUGE. Everyone had their weapons ready, though even Hobar with his rocket launcher expressed doubt that they had enough to face whatever the hell it was on the surface.

Finally they reached the top, after five minutes of agonizing anticipation. Nothing but smoke and ruins awaited them. The Yellows just stared. Everything was destroyed. It was as if the Yellow encampment had never existed. Not only had the base been flattened, but it had also been incinerated, for even the rubble itself had been destroyed. Quite literally everything was gone.

"So this is the surface," said one of the power cores. "It sucks."

"Well it's not normally supposed to be like this," said Amber, looking around stunned as she spoke. "What the hell happened?"

"This place wasn't doing too hot when we left," said Ryan slowly. "But now it's practically been _removed _from existence!"

"What could possibly have done all this?" Amber asked.

"There's no radiation, so it wasn't nuked," said Wren.

"But whatever did it was definitely huge," said Patton.

Hearts looked over and saw that Brian was looking up jovially into the sky. He gently nudged the former Blue to get him to pay attentionâ€|again. But Brian didn't move, except to regard Hearts with barely a glance. Then Brain said "Umâ€|did you guys notice that giant thing in the sky? 'Cause I think it might be what you guys are talking about."

The other Yellows looked upwards, and they began to gape. An incomparably huge _thing_ was floating directly over the dead base. Six massive metal chambers were situated around a point of light which was glowing brighter than the sun. The thing was probably larger than most Frigates the Yellows were accustomed to seeing. The thing in the sky was simply hovering there, and rotating slowly about one of its axes. Small orange colored specks could be seen inside of it, which were surely its Orange soldier crew. "Holy crap," Ryan exclaimed. "This is like something straight out of Flash Gordon. I don't know if we should run, or just stay put and see what it does."

"I opt for taking it the hell out," said Hester without an ounce of fear or awe in her tone. "Thisâ€|whatever it isâ€|is clearly responsible for the destruction of this encampment. We _cannot_ allow it to do this again."

"I second that motion," said Patton. "Hobar!"

"Aw, common boss!" Ryan complained. "I never get to blow up the huge thingsâ€|"

"_We're not gonna shoot it yet, Hobar!_" Patton shouted back at him. "We can't take it out with the weapons we have equipped, it's much too big."

Ryan began to nod. "Yeah, I thought so, boss. Because it's not like that thing can be felled with just a few rockets and grenades." He began to backpedal slowly out from under the shadow of the thing in the sky. "Well then, I uh, I guess we'll just have to go back to the firebase and restalkâ€|"

"We need to board it and blow it up from the inside," Patton finished.

The others members of Lemon Squadron nodded approvingly as Ryan let out a huge groan.

* * *

><p>The Might of the Empress was not the oddest ship that Yoren Stendaar had been on. It was still pretty close, however. When Solienne Tarl had told him that the Orange Army had brought along a weapon capable of doing to Trevelyan Fields all that an array of Green Frigates had done to it two years ago, Stendaar had simply gone along with the comment, thinking in his private mind that certainly it was just a ploy. There was no way that the Orange Army could have gained possession of such a weapon, no matter where they had gone in the strange alternate dimension they claimed to have come from. But then, just before the ongoing battle, Tarl had brought this craft down from orbit and shown it to the Purples, a great ship that looked like a cross between a very strange six-sided die and three hourglasses which had somehow been forced together at the midsection. Tarl had insisted that Stendaar should join him on the craft. In support of their alliance, Stendaar had agreed.

The interior of the Might of the Empress looked very similar to what Stendaar had always imagined an Orange ship would be, even as odd of one as this: orange colored lighting was everywhere, making everything look as though it was washed in fire. The vectors for the artificial gravity worked a bit differently for this craft, given its odd shape and the fact it always had to be slowly rotation on an axis for some reason: "down" on the ship actually meant towards the outer hull, such that the decks were actually hollow shells surrounding one another, with people walking along the surface of each shell, and each deck level "up" being inside the deck before it. The bridge was the innermost deck, surrounded by the rest of the ship.

The bridge room was shaped like a ball, with round metal grating walkway cutting through its middle, the place where people could actually stand. On all surfaces of the room were monitors showing the view in that direction outside of the ship. The whole room actually looked like a vista of the battlefield. Since the ship had entered the battle, Tarl had been standing where he was now: in front of the main control console for the ship. Immediately upon entering, Stendaar had asked him what this ship actually did, as well as how it worked. Tarl had given but a small chuckle, then turned back to what he was doing.

Tarl was not a particularly forthcoming man, but he wasn't boring either: as the ship soared above Trevelyan Fields, and the two of them watched from above as legions of Purple, Orange, and Yellow soldiers met with explosive force, they did carry on a small conversation. "Peace is not what it once was," Tarl began. "The galaxy is now filled with war, and I doubt that most young people even recall what it feels to be in a time of peace."

"And it is only becoming more warlike, with the events directly below us serving as an example," said Stendaar. He turned and looked Tarl directly in the visor. "Tell me—does your Empress truly serve the cause of peace?"

"But of course," Tarl responded frankly. "In a galaxy of war, however, the methods for obtaining peace are not always nonviolent, or even close to it. There are some who say that the best way to extinguish a bonfire is with water. But my Army and its Empress, we believe that the best way is with more fire. Better to starve the

flames by depriving them of oxygen, then to use great amounts of water, when forgotten embers may rekindle the cycle of burning after the water has long since dried."

"My Army's beliefs are similar," said Stendaar. "We believe that peace should be imposed upon the galaxy, for without a central power to keep order, there can only be chaos. However, we also believe in putting justice first. That is why the Big Three have become our targets, for the wrath that they have broughtâ€"particularly the Green Armyâ€"must be met with an equal show of force, devastation for devastation, to ensure balance."

"Balance," said Tarl slowly. "While I see the value in it, I do not necessarily see the need for it to be placed above all other values. The Empress believes in peace, and for it to be the end of all our Army's plans. That was why she bothered to attend the War Council, even despite her lack of invitation: she was giving the Big Three the chance to see reason. When that failed, she decided that fire needed to be used to extinguish fire, and so we now have the battle you see before you."

"Fire must be used when the others do not see reason, on that point both our Armies agree," said Stendaar. "Rather, it seems that balance is the key difference of our Armies values. But both are for peace in the long run, and that is what truly matters. We shall use our alliance to become powerful, and rid ourselves of Amnion and the Reds. Then the Big Three will fall."

"And glory shall be ours," said Tarl, though he paused before saying it, seeming deep in thought. He looked up at one of the screens. "Ah, we have arrived at our destination."

"The energy signatures?" Stendaar asked.

Tarl nodded. "Yet it appears that the Yellows have beaten us to it. Ah, it is no matter: it only means that I can demonstrate to you the power of this vessel sooner than I had originally expected."

Down below sat a shaft which led into the ground further than Stendaar could make out. The surface around it was covered with lights of several different colors. Yet surrounding it was a great Yellow base, a ring of military structures clad in lemon-colored paint. The Yellow encampment formed a thick ring around the installation entrance. There were hundreds of Yellows in vehicles and on foot, marching within the base and preparing to head down into the installation. Tarl hit a few commands on the main console, and then stepped back to watch. The cameras zoomed in to the top of a ridge overlooking the eastern edge of the encampment. A very large company of Orange soldiers had pulled up, and were cautiously looking down at the Yellows below. "The first wave," Tarl indicated to Stendaar. Then he gave the command into his mike: "_Fire._"

The twelve soldiers at the front of the company aimed a set of very bulky weapons down at the encampment. Then they released, and several tens of glowing orange orbs of light were suddenly sent cascading down into the Yellow Base. Stendaar was appalled by what he saw. It was like a hail from hell: once the orbs made contact, they immediately scattered in all directions, and everything they touchedâ€"Stendaar had never seen anything like this. Everything they touched seemed to vaporize into glowing particles in the air.

Structures collapsed as their supports disappeared. Vehicles, and even people, were all turned into glowing points of light. As all of this was happening, the Orange squad on the ridge had begun to move downwards, yelling a battle cry as they slid down the steep slope towards the encampment.

The Yellows still in the base did not bother to engage the Oranges, for they were already too preoccupied just staying alive, not to mention shocked by the sudden devastation around them. This changed when the Oranges came to the entrance to the installation: the Yellows had managed to set up barricades along the opposite edge of the shaft, and were firing back at the Oranges to keep them from entering. The Oranges set up their own barricades and fired back with their strange orb-emitting guns. The Yellows were hampered by this, but persevered, eventually managing to provide cover fire for a group of Yellows to make it to the elevator at the center of the shaft and head down into the installation.

This was the moment when Tarl decided it was time for the second and final wave. He ordered the company of Oranges to retreat back to the edge of the encampment, and then he pulled up on the command console a set of command options for the ship itself. He painted an area over the entire Yellow encampment, and then he hit INITIATE. "Now comes the second wave," he informed Stendaar. "Now, you shall see the Might of the Empress." There was a rumble from all around the ship.

What weaponry has the Orange Army gained from the alternate dimension, Stendaar wondered to himself. A demonstration of power, indeed, but how exactly have they acquired it? All six sides of the ship were now glowing, and according to the readings on the monitors, there was now a tremendous electromagnetic field outside which was surrounding the entire ship. Then something began glowing from directly above Stendaar. It was a glow of tendril-like light which stretched out from directly above the central chamber, from the exact center of the ship itself. Looking at it, Stendaar was suddenly filled with a sense of awe and wonder. The light above him was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He felt complete, whole somehow, and he could only focus upon the light.

Then the entire ship became light, and the Yellow encampment outside vanished.

When Stendaar could see again, he slowly regained his mental senses. The light had captivated him, but now it had faded, as had the electromagnetic field around the ship. But below him, the Yellow encampment had been completely annihilated. No structures rose above the ground any longer, for all there was now was simply ruin where the encampment had once existed.

"Do you see?" Tarl asked him. "Do you see the true power of the Might of the Empress, and by extension, of the Orange Army itself?"

"They are great indeed," said Stendaar. "But how are they possible? What did your Army find in the other dimension that allows you to do this?"

"In time you will learn," said Tarl. "And now, the installation."

Tarl gave commands to the Orange company to move into the shaft. At once, the Oranges began marching over the still smoking remains of the Yellow encampment, towards the great opening in the earth. But suddenly, great metal panels began to close over the shaft, sealing the massive opening shut with a CLANG. The Yellows had clearly installed some kind of failsafe for just such a situation as this, where their base had been compromised, ensuring that even in defeat their enemies would not take the prize. To this, Tarl ordered another of the Oranges devices be brought out, and to Stendaar's intrigue they did not disappoint: they looked like gigantic drills on wheels. They angled themselves just to the east of the entrance, and then the drills rose on hydraulic instruments to angle themselves vertically, so that they were pointing at the ground.

"You're going to drill down into the installation," said Stendaar.

"We are indeed," said Tarl. The ground rumbled down below as the drills began to spin, slowly lowering themselves into the earth. At the same time, Tarl queued up a rather large host of aircraft from nearby, hundreds of VTOLs and airborne attack vehicles. He requested that Stendaar do the same. Stendaar obliged.

Most of the Purple Army as at the front lines, keeping the Yellow Army at bay while the Orange Army secured the artifacts, as had been the plan. So far, things were going mostly to plan: the Yellows had stayed near the south of the fields, with the small exception of the encampment which had just been destroyed. Yet while most Purple forces were far away, there were enough still near the installation's location that they would certainly bolster whatever force Tarl was already sending in. Great holes now existed in the ground, and Orange aircraft had begun descending into them when the Purple forces Stendaar had requested began to show up. Yet they were not alone when they did so: the Yellow Army had now succeeded in getting a small number of reinforcements to the entrance's location. A couple hundred of them took up residence by the opposite side of the shaft, installing some kind of key code that made the metal doors atop the shaft open slightly, on their side, so that they could start getting some forces down into the installation as well.

Stendaar briefly glanced at Tarl to see his reaction to this, but Tarl hardly seemed to care, no doubt thinking that the Orange and Purple union of forces heading into the installation would be many times more than enough to repel the newly arrived Yellows. Tarl did little more than watch the Yellows head down the shaft, until they had all left the surface. The radio chatter coming to the ship from down below told both of them everything they needed to know: the installation contained millions of energy storage devices which not only contained all the energy they had been predicted to, but also were actually sentient, having made an entire city out of themselves, a civilization. The risk of detonations of them from weapons fire would make combat in the installation difficult, but that held true for the Yellows down there as well, so no advantage was lost to either side. Tarl gave the order for collection of the devices to begin as soon as the Yellows had been dealt with.

From that moment on, things started to go relatively slowly. The city of power cores was already practically taken, because there were hardly any Yellows within it to begin with. Several minutes went by

while the two of them listened to reports of the power core's extraction getting underway.

Then suddenly, alarm klaxons started blaring. The ship had somehow been boarded. Tarl quickly pulled up the camera feeds of the area of the ship in question. He saw a corridor full of Orange soldiers whom had all keeled over. Standing above them were several Yellow soldiers, most of which had reflective golden armor. _Lemon Squadron_, Stendaar and Tarl both thought in unison. Lemon wasn't alone: floating next to the Yellows were several long metallic boxes which were simply levitating in the air. Tarl ordered that section of the ship to be sealed off immediately, though privately Stendaar doubted that effort would do very much, especially in light of Lemon's previous escape from the _Avant Garde_ itself.

When he had done everything he could, Tarl stepped back from the console. "This is only a slight annoyance, as more of my Army's technology will no doubt show you soon. However, it has moved up my timetable a bit." He hit a few keys on his tacpad. "Yes, the time of the final phase of this operation is now at hand."

A pair of Orange guards suddenly appeared from behind Stendaar and grabbed his arms, holding him. "W-what is this?" Stendaar shouted.

"It is time to put out fire with more fire," was all Tarl said in response. "The power cores will soon be in my Army's possession, so we have no further need of our alliance with your Army anymore, Stendaar." He began pacing slowly around the command room. "I had not planned on doing this until we had already gotten out with the power cores, but with Lemon Squadron on this ship, I have to make sure that the last phase has been completed before this vessel is compromised."

Stendaar could only stare in shock at Tarl. "What last phase? What're you talking about, Tarl! Our Armies had a deal! We help you get the power cores, and you help us get rid of Amnion."

Tarl only shook his head and gave the same small chuckle he had become known for. "You Purples are all gullible fools. With Amnion as powerful as he is, did you seriously think that my Army would _wait_ to get rid of him, if we were capable of doing so? We are not quite _that_ powerful, Stendaar. We never intended to help your Army, only to use it. Guards, take him to the brig."

"YOU LIAR!" Stendaar shouted as the guards began to move him out of the room. "When Vorennius finds out about this, he will turn his forces on these fields against you. You will never leave Trevelyan with the power cores!"

Tarl only shook his helmet slowly. "You forget, Stendaar. Fire with fire. This ship is capable of far more than just the destruction of one encampment. With the heart of the Quantum Manipulator powering it, the _Might of the Empress_ has the ability to do to these _entire fields_ what it has done to that insignificant Yellow outpost. Both Yellow and Purple forces will fall, and then the Oranges will return to claim our prize."

A cold feeling crawled down Stendaar's spine as he finally understood the extent of Tarl's plan. _He intends to destroy all of Trevelyan,

everyone and everything, and then take the power cores after everyone has died._ He could only let out a cry of fury as the guards took him down the hallway, a howl of betrayal.

27. The Race Is Completed

27 " THE RACE IS COMPLETED

Lemon Squadron and Yellow Team had gained a few very powerful new allies in the last hour, who were perhaps the most powerful beings on Trevelyan fields, and were proving to be an invaluable resource for the Yellows to reach their goal. They were, of course, power cores. The levitating metallic boxes were entirely sentient, if not perhaps smarter than the average human, and were capable of firing bolts of lightning from their ends which could fry anything they touched. They would be the Lemon Squadron's ace in the hole for destroying the strange Orange spacecraft which had just annihilated a Yellow encampment.

The power cores had levitated the Yellow up into the outermost deck of the craft. The decks of the ship were all roughly spherical, curved in on one another such that they were basically shells, with each deck surrounding the one above it. "Above" meant towards the center of the ship, and the Yellows discovered this the hard way when they crashed through the outermost wall of the ship, erupting into an access corridor. They were all riding atop a power core, and the metallic boxes quickly set everyone down close to the floor so they could get off. Ryan looked out one of the windows. "What, this can't be right! I'm looking straight down at the ground." He then looked at the floor beneath him. "Which means that my feet are pointing at the eastern horizon."

"This vessel must have a spherical vector space for its artificial gravity," said Wren. "Everything is attracted to the center, so all the decks are like globes inside of one another. I've heard of some designs like this, but they're pretty rare. The Oranges must have a different style."

"The center is where we need to be," said Deryn. "The engines for this thing would need to be right in the middle, and the control room ought to be placed just on top of that. We take out the engines, as well as whichever important person is controlling this ship."

Hester nodded. "A solid plan. Let's go."

They began the search for some kind of elevator. Small echoes went throughout the small corridors as the Yellows paced cautiously through them, their weapons pointed up. The Yellow's sudden entrance to the ship was bound to be noticed, so they believed, and the Oranges did not disappoint: as the Yellows neared the end of their third corridor, the blast doors in front of them suddenly flew open, and a welcoming party of a dozen Oranges burst through. Lemon Squadron could easily have taken them out with automatic fire, but the power cores actually beat them to the task. Several bolts of lightning assaulted the Oranges, hitting them all in the crotch area. They all dropped their weapons, reached down while groaning, and then keeled over, unconscious.

"Did that hit their _crotch?_" Ryan asked. "_Dude!_"

Clair was also shaking her helmet. "Yeeeah," she said slowly. "That's really not right. But they don't look dead, just unconscious."

In response, one of the power cores exclaimed: "We shall remove the reproductive abilities from all whom oppose the Power Core Empire. The Epic Glory of the Lord of the Digest's Moustache has decreed it!"

"So now they're Ottomans," Clair muttered under her breath.

"We need to get moving," said Hester. "More of them are bound to show up soon."

The group began to sprint through the halls, leaving the sleeping Orange guards behind them. As they moved, the walls suddenly started to vibrate, and they could all hear a rumbling sound coming from somewhere else in the ship. "Something's powering up," said Clair while looking at readings on her tacpad. "There's quite a lot of energy being harnessed. Maybe not as much as is inside a power core, but definitely enough that it's cause for concern."

"Where's a damn elevator?" Hester hissed. After another twenty seconds of sprinting, they finally came to a lift. The space inside was rather small, and the Yellows and power cores were just barely able to squeeze in. The doors closed, and then the elevator music started. It was some kind of techno mix, an old retro style.

"Couldn't they have chosen something catchier?" Ryan murmured. The ride was long and slow. Meanwhile, the rumbling became louder, and the vibrations of the ship became more pronounced. After almost a minute with everyone cramped in a small space, the car slowed down and the doors opened. Two Orange guards stood waiting, and between them they were both holding a Purple soldier who was wearing fancy armor. The Purple's arms were bound by some kind of glowing transparent band.

Upon seeing the elevator somehow packed full of Yellow soldiers and strange floating metallic boxes, the Orange guards both started at each other for a short moment. Ryan had the sudden idea of saying: "Hey guys! We're prisoners. We were just, uh, recently captured. We're just heading to our cell blocks. Yeah. There's a holding sector right next to the engine roomâ€¦" He looked at Patton for help.

"This is your thing," Patton whispered back to him. "I can't help you."

Ryan turned back to the Oranges. "If you guys could, uh, show us how to get to the engine roomâ€¦"

"There's a cell block next to the engine room?" one of the Oranges asked. He turned to the other Orange. "Y'know man, this ship is so freaken' weird. I swearâ€¦"

While the Oranges engaged each other in some light chat, the Yellows were now all staring at the Purple, because they had all recognized him. "Holy crap," Amber whispered. "That's Yoren Stendaar! He's a member of Vorennius' Vice Admiralty. And he's bound. I think he's

been taken prisoner."

"You don't say," the Purple whispered back to them with a tone of severe annoyance. "You are Lemon Squadron. Interesting that we should meet here, isn't it?"

One of the Oranges interjected: "Yeah, this Purple guy's a great find. He's not the most talkative fellow when he's captured, though." The Orange currently speaking tried to walk into the elevator, but Stendaar suddenly yanked backwards with both of his arms, shoving the binds, and causing both of the Oranges holding him to stumble. Before the Oranges could even figure out what was going on, the Purple then twisted his orientation so that he was facing a wall, and shoved the binding cord close to an electrical outlet. The cord must have been some kind of contained electromagnetic field, because it sparked and fizzed out of existence as soon as it came in contact with the wall's circuit. The Oranges, having been shoved away from Stendaar, were now hurrying back towards him. They hadn't realized that Stendaar was now unbound, and as the first Orange came up close, Stendaar whipped something out from his tool belt, which flashed in the air as he moved it about, and the guard was suddenly reaching for his own throat as a torrent of red liquid poured from his jugular. The second guard lunged for Stendaar, but the Purple moved like a cat. The Orange was still putting up his arms up to defend himself when Stendaar shoved his combat knife through the guard's visor.

"Oh fuck," Ryan whispered as the second Orange fell back.

Stendaar turned slowly, regarding Lemon Squadron as though they were just a nuisance. "Solienne Tarl means to destroy all of Trevelyan Fields. He must be stopped."

"Not before we stop you," said Patton. The Yellows opened fire, but Stendaar began sprinting in his high-powered armor, moving faster than Lemon could aim. The door at the opposite end of the hallway had slid closed before the rounds fired by the Yellows hit their mark.

"Shit," said Hester.

"He's trying to stop Tarl from doing something, right?" said Amber. "And presumably, Tarl is the commander of this ship. So we just find Tarl, and we should find Stendaar."

"And I'm guessing Tarl is at the heart of this vessel," said Deryn. "This ship is some great weapon, and Tarl must have used it to annihilate the base just outside the installation. So stopping Tarl is definitely our priority, and if we get Stendaar as well, that's just icing in the cake."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," said Hester. "Let's go." The Yellows moved out. They had to find another elevator, because the one they had just stepped out of would go no further. They came upon several more squads of Orange soldiers along the way, being sent to stop the boarders. Lemon Squadron was well prepared for all of them, but they were persistent. Most encounters were foot soldiers, but they did come upon a few mounted turrets. The Oranges couldn't use their orb projectile weapons because they couldn't allow their own ship to disintegrate in the process. This left only standard weapons, and both sides could play at that game. Lemon went through the enemy

forces as though they were nothing: they had been through numerous operations like this, and after having survived a mission on the Avant Garde several days ago (which had been a true challenge), Lemon felt unleashed in the face of the predictable Orange forces, and the power cores made things even easier, by vaporizing whole groups of Oranges with lightening, right where they were standing.

It wasn't long before they found another elevator, one which would take them very close to the core of the ship. By this time, a legion of Oranges were following them, and the Yellows were racing down the corridor as bullets whizzed by like drops in a sideways rainstorm. "EVERYONE IN NOW!" Hester shouted. The other Yellows obliged, some of them grabbing onto the power cores so that they could be whisked into the car. A battle cry sounded from behind them, as dozens of Oranges ran down the hallway screaming at the top of their lungs. The elevator doors closed just before the mob reached them.

"I think we may have pissed them off somehow," said Ryan.

"Boarding a place and blowing a bunch of shit up usually has that effect," Patton agreed.

Wren was staring at some schematics on her tacpad. "So guys, this elevator will take us almost where we want to be. We'll have to get off at the Exterior Command Level. From there, we'll need to somehow break through to the Interior Command Level, and from there we can get to the Core Sector, which houses the Command Dome and the Engine Core."

Inez had had her explosives ready for some time now. "Breaking into places won't be a problem."

"Where's the elevator music?" Brian asked. The elevator stopped and the doors opened to reveal what could officially be described as a Shitload of Orange soldiers. "Oh, that's right!" Brian exclaimed. "They're using the elevator to herd us into an ambush. That actually makes a lot of sense. Um, guys? We can deal with this, right?" Everyone else had already taken cover at the sides of the door (this elevator being much larger than the previous one). Brain quickly did the same.

"Come out with your hands up!" screamed an Orange at the front of the mob outside.

"Why don't you?" Ryan called out.

There was a lot of mumbling among the Oranges. "What?" their leader asked.

"We don't you guys surrender?" Ryan asked again.

"Why the fuck would we do that?" the mob leader asked.

"Because we're Lemon Squadron," Ryan replied. "Or at least, they are." He pointed a finger out, across the elevator at the members of Lemon. It nearly got shot off from a stream of gunfire, so he pulled it back.

"You'll all be grenaded if you don't come out of there," said the mob

leader.

Ryan called back: "If you guys don't surrender, Lemon willâ€|"

"Will what?" asked the mob leader.

"We'll makeâ€|_orange juiceâ€|_out of all of you."

"_What?"_ said the mob leader.

Amber was staring at Ryan as though he were mentally retarded.
"_That_ was the best you could come up with?"

Hearts was shaking his helmet as well. "That's a fail, man."

Ryan shrugged. "I couldn't think of anything else!"

Now it was the mob leader's turn: "If you lot don't come out of there, my men will make _lemon juice_ out of you!" He then gave a pause, as though he expected his men to laugh. After a moment, he shouted: "Ah, common! I had to give it a try!" But lots of other Oranges were shaking their helmets.

"Can we just throw some grenades in there already?" another Orange soldier asked. Lots of helmet nodding followed this request.

Meanwhile, the Yellows all had their gauntlets firmly planted over their visors. "Too stuuupidâ€|" mumbled Ryan. "Why the fuck did I start this?"

"READY GRENADES!" the mob leader suddenly yelled from outside.

"Power cores, do your thing now!" Hearts exclaimed.

At once, the power cores burst from either side of the elevator and sent out a lightning storm of energy, decimating the Orange mob in just seconds. From the hallway there came a chorus of groaning as every Orange soldier suddenly doubled over, clutching their crotch. The Yellows simply walked right on by them.

"So, how do we get to the Interior Command Level, or whatever it was you said earlier?" Tom asked Wren.

"We need to blow up the ceiling," she replied. "The center of the ship is above us."

Tom nodded. "Right, right. Inez?"

As usual, Inez was already getting things done: she had taken out a set of charges and was installing them to the ceiling. They all made little beeping noises as she attached them, and they looked like rather noisy Christmas decorations (albeit rather dangerous ones) once the weapons specialist had completed her task. Hester gave the call for everyone to step back, everyone did so, and then there was a "fire in the hole!" and a great BOOM. From up above, a toilet came crashing down with an Orange still sitting on it. A stream of tap water rushed down into the hallway, drenching the Orange soldier. He stood up slowly, trying to put up the leg sections of his

armor.

"Wâ€"whatâ€"theâ€" he moaned, looking around.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," said Hester. Then she put him into a choke hold until he was unconscious. When that was over, there was the scene of an Orange soldier with his pants down, sleeping on a disconnected toilet in the middle of an access hallway. Ryan was about to ponder aloud what kind of painting that might make, but then Patton bellowed: "Time to move." He began climbing up the newly created rubble. "After this, we still need to break into the Core." The others followed eagerly, moving gently passed the sleeping Orange as they did so.

Climbing up through the hole, they appeared in the bathroom that the toilet had come from. They crept quietly out of the bathroom stall and found themselves next to a rather sizable shower room. It looked empty, but there was one small echo. It sounded almost likeâ€"singing. The Yellows crept forward, heading towards the sound. It turned out to be coming from one of the shower stalls. Someone was using it, and at the same time they were singing opera music at the top of their lungs. Whoever it was, they appeared to be completely oblivious to the fact that a bathroom stall in the next room had just exploded. Hearts slowly pulled back the curtains at the edge to take a look inside. An Orange soldier was standing underneath a running showerâ€"still entirely clad in their armorâ€"and they were massaging their wrist cuffsâ€"singing to them, it seemed like.

Then the curtain accidentally came down, someone having stepped in it with their armored foot. The Orange looked up suddenly. He and the Yellows stared at each other for some time. "You'reâ€"you're not Orange," the Orange eventually managed.

"You're weird," said Ryan.

"Tell us how to get to the Core Sector from here," Patton demanded.

The Orange sounded as though it were just a normal situation. "Oh, of course. Just go out of this room into the hallway, take two lefts, and there should be an elevator which will take you there."

"Umâ€"thanks," said Patton. The Yellows just let him be, since he clearly wasn't any kind of threat (the worst he could do was tell Lemon's location, and they were sure the security on the ship already knew exactly where the Yellows were). The Orange started singing again as they left the shower room.

* * *

><p>Things were not going exactly according to plan for Solienne Tarl. Lemon Squadron had boarded the ship and were heading for the Core as fast as they could, unhindered by the security forces. Also, Yoren Stendaar had escaped custody before reaching his cell, and somehow the Purple had been able to alert the rest of his Army to Tarl's sleight of hand, because now both the Purple and Orange Armies were pulling out of Trevelyan as fast as they could, and both parties were fighting each other. Only the Yellows were holding position on the field, and they clearly had no idea what was going on. Tarl

checked his forces inside the installation. Things were actually going well down there, because the Purples had decided to pull entirely out. The installation would actually be safe from the wrath of the Might of the Empress (due to selective targeting), but there was no way for the Purples to know that. The Orange Army had now effectively overrun the installation, and the few hundred Yellows they had found down there had all been captured. The power cores were already effectively in the Orange Army's possession.

He heard a sound behind him and turned around. "Stendaar, I thought I might be seeing you again."

Standing on the other side of the room was Yoren Stendaar, a bloody combat knife held in his right gauntlet. A barrier separated the two of them, a force field which Tarl had been sure to erect. "You're a traitor, Tarl!" Stendaar exclaimed.

"A betrayer, perhaps," Tarl replied. "But not a traitor. I have always been faithful to my own Army. It is yours I have double crossed."

"I won't let you activate this ship," Stendaar stated.

"You cannot stop me," said Tarl. "This ship is the fire that shall extinguish the inferno. Just look down below, at the fields, Stendaar. The flames of war are consuming countless lives, even as we speak. The Might of the Empress shall end such conflicts."

"By ending everyone on the fields!" Stendaar shouted. "You're mad, Tarl. You're whole Army is completely insane if it has gone along with this!"

"Is the continuation of war more sane?" Tarl asked him.

"Enough talk!" Stendaar exclaimed. He took from his tool belt a large metallic ball and threw it at the force field. There was a bright flash, and all the electronics in the room suddenly sparked as the electromagnetic pulse went throughout the room. The force field vanished, and suddenly Stendaar was right in front of Tarl, with a combat knife to his throat. "Your controls are gone, and now I have you. It is over, Tarl!" He tried to push the blade deep, but suddenly it wouldn't move.

Tarl reached up and grasped Stendaar's hand, his stone hard grip forcing the Purple to lose his grip. "My armor's shielding is impenetrable," he stated. He bent Stendaar's arm backwards. Stendaar cried out in pain and slowly went to his knees. "I knew you would come back for me. You Purples are always so predictable." A group of guards walked into the room and drew their weapons, aiming them at the held down Stendaar. "I won't bother having you put in a cell," Tarl continued. "No, this time it's just a firing squad. Goodbye, Yoren Stendaar."

That was when the main wall exploded. Piles of debris and sparking machinery cascaded into the command dome. Out of surprise, Tarl was forced to let go of Stendaar, and the Purple jumped up and away from the Orange. However, Tarl's focus was now upon the mess that had been made of the room and the Yellows which were standing in its wake. "Lemon Squadron," Tarl hissed.

"Hello, Tarl," said Tom. "We all just thought we'd pop in for a bit. Or explode in."

"If you're hoping to stop the _Might of the Empress_, you've arrived in vain," said Tarl. He quickly checked the status of his forces. By this point, nearly all Orange forces had pulled out of Trevelyan. So had the Purples, but the Yellows still remained in place. It would be their loss, then. He had waited for longer than he had intended to already: it was time to end the race to betrayal between the Purple and Orange Armies, and time for the Orange Army to take what was rightfully in its possession. Before the Yellows could figure out what he was doing, he entered the command codes for the _Might of the Empress_ to send out a maximum force destruction wave. For the Yellows, the endgame came without warning.

The sounds and vibrations of the nearby engines suddenly got a LOT louder. The Yellows all looked around in surprise. "What's going on?" Clair asked.

Wren was staring at her tacpad's readings in surprise. "The ship is sending itself into overdrive! Whatever superweapon this thing has, it's about to fire. And this timeâ€¦"

"All of Trevelyan will fall," Clair finished. "Oh God."

From the corner, Stendaar suddenly shot back towards Tarl. "NOOOO!" He made one final attempt to slash at the Orange Commander, but Tarl pulled out a weapon which assembled in his hands before Stendaar realized it was there. There was the sound of something charging up, then a flash, and Stendaar was sent flying backwards, red liquid oozing out of his chestplate from several places. As the _Might of the Empress_ entered its final stage for the destruction wave, Stendaar moaned: "Whyâ€¦" before he went unconscious.

The room filled with light, the most beautiful thing the Yellows had ever seen. And then Trevelyan Fields was no more.

End
file.